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THE SIRDAR'S SABRE

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THE SIRDAR'S SABRE

BEING FOR THE MOST PART

THE ADVENTURES OF SIRDAR BAHADUR MOHAMMED KHAN

BY

LOUIS TRACY

AUTHOR OF 'RAINBOW ISLAND,' 'PRINCESS KATE,'
'THE REVELLERS,' ETC.

LONDON
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'For, don't you see, the folks at home have never heard of Mhow;
They don't know Rawalpindi from Lahóre.
They cannot even understand why slaughtering a cow
Should make men kill each other by the score.
They don't know what a jungle is, cantónment, or *maidán*[1];
They might mistake a *hathi*[2] for a *bail*.[3]
They think the Lord has put the best of all creation's plan
Within the cliffs of Britain's little isle.'

The Song of the Time-Expired.

[1] Plain. [2] Elephant. [3] Bullock.

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PREFACE

Readers of *Pearson's Magazine* and the *Pall Mall Magazine* will remember that several of the adventures related in this book have been told already in the form of separate short stories. Quite one-third of the volume, however, now appears for the first time, and the whole is arranged consecutively, with some heed to continuous interest. It is not, nor would I publish, a collection of stories having no relation one to the other.

To those of my readers who do not know and love India, I may say that I have endeavoured, within the elastic limits of a romance, to draw true pictures of Indian life and character.

L. T.

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	FIRST IMPRESSIONS	1
II.	LA BELLE AMERICAINE . . .	17
III.	HOW MOHAMMED KHAN BECAME INVULNERABLE	43
IV.	HOW THE SIRDAR PREVENTED A GREAT WAR	72
V.	THE TÀJ—AND A FORTUNE-TELLER .	92
VI.	HOW THE SIRDAR DACOITED A DACOIT .	117
VII.	HOW WE FED CROCODILES ON THE INDUS	138
VIII.	THE DESTINY OF THE EMERALD EYE .	165
IX.	HOW WE GUARDED THE GREAT PEARL NECKLACE	190
X.	HOW THE SIRDAR FOUGHT ALI BAGH, THE AFRIDI	215
	L'ENVOI	240

CHAPTER I

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Why did I, Reginald Wayne, being sound of mind and body, and in no wise dependent on the use of either for a living, ever go to India?

Well, in the first instance, I must blame my father—major-general, Indian Army, retired. He filled the waking hours of my boyhood with Urdu inflected verbs, and crowded my dreams with vivid pictures of the purple East. I saw bejewelled Maharajas reclining on silken cushions in dim Byzantine halls, whilst Nautch-girls danced and cymbals clashed, and bright eyes shone through gossamer veils. With him I roamed dense jungles, where tigers crouched behind each rock, where giant snakes coiled around every gorgeous tree, and where the earth throbbed with the rush of mighty elephants. Those dreams were murderous, alike to beast and man. Often have I, in

imagination, leaned forward in the saddle, sword in hand, and crashed valiantly into a seething vortex of brown dust and browner bodies. Nor did the glamour weaken as I shot up from youth to manhood. When it was settled that I should exchange from a home regiment into the 2nd Bengal Lancers, the old war-horse of the family electrified me by saying—

'By Gad, Reggie, if I were a few years younger I would go out with you, in the hope that there might be a riot when we reached Bombay. Even yet I think I could gallop through the bazaar and lay about 'em with the flat of a sabre.'

Ah, how little he guessed how many a time I had longed to gallop somewhere and lay about somebody.

So, firstly, I plead the influence of home; and secondly, I summon to witness the romantic strain, which we Britons hide so doggedly that men of other nations deem us phlegmatic, sullen, morose. Yet the bones of our kith and kin whiten the by-ways of the world and chart the unseen tracks of ocean. Unromantic! We, those among us who know our history, laugh at the folly of it.

Something of my own life, a great deal more of the career of a man far more remarkable, will tell you much of India. I leave you to judge whether our critical neighbours ''cross Channel' can produce such recitals from the veterans of their public services.

My Anglo-Indian education really commenced when I gained the deck of the P. and O. steamship *Peninsular* in the East India Dock, and found myself gazing curiously at the sahib and the mem-sahib, the impertinent child, the nose-ringed ayah, the Staff Corps subaltern, the judge, the policeman, and the half-dozen young ladies under the captain's care, going out to get married.

I had seen them all in photographs, had limned them fancifully from my father's words, but here they were in flesh and blood, materialised spirit-shapes from the astral regions of a boy's visions. They were strange yet familiar to my eyes, just as the crude Hindustani orders shouted by officers and quarter-masters to the ape-like Lascars were novel to my ears yet clear to my understanding.

But the unreality faded quickly. By

the time we reached 'Gib.' I never said Gibraltar. When we went ashore at Malta I knew why the human race is composed exclusively of Britons, natives, and foreigners. Before I had walked ten yards through the main street of Port Said I felt that one of the props of the empire is the saluting policeman, the human semaphore to whom every white man in an Elwood *sola topi*[1] is of the sacred order of the Officer-Sahib.

The voyage to Bombay is a preliminary course for the university degree of Anglo-India. In twenty days you are a new being.

But one touch of nature makes everybody swear. Even the self-possessed sahib joined me in profanity when we faced the methods of the Bombay Custom-house.

There was a time, now dim in legend, I am told, when landing at Bombay was a pleasant thing, when you and your belongings were whisked away by active boatmen to the *Apollo Bunder*, and you were established in your hotel almost before you realised that the vessel had arrived in port.

A feeble imitation of a French douane, with all its drawbacks and none of its

[1] Pith hat.

civility, has changed all that. The wretched passengers are stowed on board a tug in sweltering batches, and, after waiting an unnecessary and uncomfortable half-hour, turned loose amidst a luggage jungle, peopled by incoherent Customs officers.

They had forgotten to tell me at home that guns were dutiable in India. I carried with me a regular battery. Elephants, I knew, abounded, and tigers were frequently met with in railway stations. So I brought an 8-bore and a ·450 express—weapons never heard of in the wilds of Hindustan!

For personal protection from the ferocious coolie and the bloodthirsty *chaukidar*[1] I possessed a couple of revolvers, whilst a commonplace 12-bore for birds formed the least warlike item of my equipment.

The complicated and very inefficient Customs arrangements were not improved by a cash payment of 10 per cent. *ad valorem* duty on my expensive guns, and to add injury to insult a native porter tumbled a Saratoga trunk on to my favourite corn.

It was labelled 'Hiram T. Potts, Pottsville, Pa., U.S.A.'

[1] Night-watchman.

'D—n Hiram T. Potts, and Pottsville and Pa., too!' I shrieked, dancing about in agony.

'Say, was you speakin' of me, mister?' growled a stern voice.

'Yes, I was,' I roared, hopping around to confront a tall, elderly, raw-boned American, whose steel-blue eyes were glaring at me from beneath white bushy eyebrows.

'What's wrong with me, you dog-goned cross between a monkey and a cat?' he fiercely demanded.

'Don't you see, poppa, that your box has fallen on the gentleman's foot. I'm sure he didn't mean to be rude.'

The sweet-faced young lady who had intervened in the quarrel came on board with her father at Ismailia, but I had not made her acquaintance.

Of course I promptly apologised. Such was the manner of my first meeting with Potts and his daughter.

Tired, hot, sore, and sulky, I managed at last to rescue my belongings from the wretched shed. I flung myself on the bed in a third-story room in Watson's Hotel, and wondered vaguely why I had ever left England.

The fit of ill-humour passed with the tiffin-bell. I joined a friend, Mr. Terrant, whom people on board ship called 'Judge.' He led me to a long table where several of his acquaintances, homeward-bound, were exchanging country-made yarns with that day's importations.

One regaled us with a story of a cobra which fell from the roof of the compositors' room in the office of the *Bombay Gazette*, creating an immense commotion among the dark humorists who were making pye of somebody's 'copy' at the moment. Another told of a bungalow in Tirhoot, where he counted fourteen cobras and two *karaits*[1] whilst he smoked a cigar on the edge of a pool in the compound.

'We had some rather good fun,' he added, 'fishing for snakes.'

Everybody looked interested, so he continued—

'We baited with small live frog, dangling the hook at the bottom of an old stone well which was simply swarming with snakes. After a little temptation the snake made his grab, and we waited two or three minutes until froggy was well out of sight.

[1] A small but deadly snake common to Upper India.

Then we struck, and the way the snake wriggled until he was knocked on the head was very pretty.'

'I allow that snakes air pretty numerous round that way, mister?' drawled a voice which could only develop west of Chicago. Hiram T. Potts was the owner.

'Yes, I once went out snipe-shooting in the rains. At the end of an hour I had bagged two snipe and nine snake, so I returned home.'

'That's tolerable lively, but I reckon thar's a locality called Rattlesnake Swamp in San Juan County, Col., which would give your snake-patch two thousand reptiles and a beatin'. In '59, when I was makin' my first trip in a prospectin' outfit, an Injun killed one of our boys and bolted on his hoss, with a few dozen ounces of dust in the saddle-bags. We caught that Injun, an' heaved him inter the swamp. In two ticks he was thet blamed smothered up with rattlers, you couldn't see his top-knot.'

A lady rose from the table and audibly directed one of the Portuguese 'boys' to bring her coffee to a distant part of the room. After that the conversation flagged.

What a splendid place the verandah in

Watson's is. Every Englishman who ever came to India must have pleasant memories of it. Shady at all times of the day, roomy, bright, and cheerful, filled after meals with laughing, chatty, cheery people, who all seem to be hail-fellow-well-met—I don't know its equal for comfort and sociability. There is relief for the eyes in the dark umbrage of the opposite trees, and constant diversion for the stranger in observing the varied types of humanity gathered round the jugglers and mountebanks holding constant court in the street beneath. I was drinking in new impressions, when the Judge came to me and suggested that, as he was going to buy a couple of Arabs from a well-known dealer, I should come with him and have a look at the native town. When we passed the Victoria Terminus of the Great Indian Peninsular Railway I was naturally loud in expressing my admiration for that magnificent structure. But the Judge was caustic.

'If the company had spent the money in levelling their line and not in building a palace, they would have done better for the public,' he said. 'When you come to travel in the interior, you will observe that in

places where the surrounding country is apparently a level plain, the engine is toiling up an incline of one in forty. Even in the *ghâts*,[1] where steep gradients are necessary, they are absurdly severe. All this means loss of time, and the beauty of the station does not recompense a man for the fact that he loses several hours during a long journey owing to the slowness of the trains.'

This Vandal would prefer a few alterations in mud embankments and rock cuttings to a structure which has not its equal in the world.

Later on I understood him. At that moment I was more interested in the amazing variety of nationalities we encountered in the packed and picturesque Abdul Rahman Street.

'It is an interesting fact,' said the Judge, surveying the moving mass of humanity surging in front of our horse's head, 'that the Bombay bazaar shows more types of the *genus homo* than can be seen anywhere else in the world. Those thin, sharp-

[1] A series of steps, whether on the gigantic scale of a mountain range or a piece of masonry on the bank of a river or lake.

featured chaps there, as you have been told already in the hotel, are supposed to be descendants of the Portuguese free-booters who once ruled supreme in Western India. As a matter of fact they are largely native. In the good old days, a Hindu was often forced to choose between the cross and a gallows, the latter alternative being occasionally rendered more effective by substituting a pile of faggots or a caldron of boiling oil. Under such conditions the "conversion" of an entire village in one afternoon was an easy matter, and, as the priest baptized them *en bloc*, he christened them likewise. Hence, he would launch into existence three thousand Francisco de Souzas and as many Christofero de Marias in an hour. These people became fused with the real descendants of the Portuguese, and now the line of demarcation is lost.'

Here our *ghari-wala*,[1] and the drivers of three or four bullock-carts, laden with cotton bales, exchanged several remarks reflecting on the morality of their respective female relatives. Allegations were made affecting

[1] Carriage-driver. The termination 'wala,' or 'fellow,' denotes occupation.

the paternity of our Jehu, who was publicly stated to be the offspring of a pig. After a time the vehicular tangle became unravelled, and we proceeded.

'The same process,' continued my companion, 'is going on to-day individually under British rule. A native lad named Devi, with an eye to the main chance, becomes a Christian, and his name naturally changes to David. He learns English, and obtains a fairly good appointment, marries an Eurasian girl probably darker than himself, and forthwith appears on the voting list of the municipality as George Algernon Davidson. I need hardly say that the young Davidsons hold the "native" in fine contempt, and trace their ancestry back to Davidson of Davidson's Horse, who played the deuce with the Mahrattas during the Second War.'

'Hallo! Ram Singh, what are you doing here?' he suddenly interrupted, speaking in Urdu, and stopping the vehicle near a miserable-looking object in yellow rags, its face and hair daubed with paint and sprinkled over with ashes.

'By your honour's pleasure, I have come to worship in the temple of the holy Siva,'

replied Ram Singh, who seemed anything but pleased by the recognition.

The Judge eyed him sternly for a moment, and we passed on.

'That scoundrel is a *fakir* from the north-west,' he told me. 'He and his crew are the centres of sedition in India. They are all known to Government, and a register is kept of their whereabouts; so I suppose the police here have their eye on him. Before I went home two years ago, Ram Singh came to the great fair at Hurdwar from the Hindu colony near the Black Mountain, and would have caused no end of trouble if I hadn't packed him off. He is a long way from his haunt now, and up to no good, I am certain.'

We drew rein before a blue and white archway, which bore the legend 'Amir Ben Ali,' and entered.

Some hundreds of Arab horses were stabled on both sides of a narrow passage lined with benches, on which sat a large number of Arab horse-dealers, attired in flowing bournous, baggy trousers, and carpet shoes curled up at the toes. They were most artistically dirty.

Several animals were being ridden wildly

up and down the enclosure on our arrival, but when Amir Ben Ali advanced to meet us, some degree of order was obtained.

'I wish to buy two good polo ponies for a friend,' said the Judge. 'I have come to buy, not to look, so don't waste time.'

Then came a procession of Arabs ranging from 13 hands to 13·3, each possessing all the virtues horseflesh is heir to.

'That very cheap pony,' said Amir, pointing out a dark bay; 'little over six; any faults should show now.'

'They do show,' replied the Judge. 'Take him away.'

At last he selected two very fine animals, to my thinking, and asked the price.

'One thousand for the chestnut, and eleven hundred for the brown mare.'

'How far is Agar Khan's place from here?' inquired the Judge, rising to leave.

A shade of anxiety crossed the brow of our guide, and he begged us to wait one moment, whilst he consulted the owner. Some guttural Arabic ensued between Amir and another gentleman of the same persuasion, and at its conclusion he said—

'Mir Mohammed is a poor man, and he will return to his home utterly ruined,

but he will take eighteen hundred for the two.'

'I must inquire for Agar Khan outside,' observed the Judge to me, and we started for the gate.

'How much will your honour please give?' said Amir despairingly.

'One thousand, if they pass a veterinary examination. Come, Wayne, it is near tiffin-time.'

A mysterious wink from Amir Ben Ali sent a small boy, in no costume to speak of, flying to the gate. We found this youth seated beside our *ghari-wala* for no seeming reason, and he was subsequently an interested onlooker at Agar Khan's, when the Judge, to my amazement, almost closed with the latter for two far inferior animals for a thousand rupees.

When we drove to the hotel the small boy had disappeared, and whilst we were smoking a cigar on the verandah after dinner a *chaprassi*[1] handed a note to the Judge. He smiled and passed it to me. It read: 'Hond. Sir,—You can have the ponys for Rs.1000—Yours faithfull, Amir Ben Ali.'

[1] Messenger.

We were going out for an evening drive when a mounted policeman gave some instructions to the coachman. Terrant joined in the conversation, and, as the result, we turned in the opposite direction.

'I told you that Ram Singh, the fakir, was here for no good,' said the Judge.

'Yes?'

'Well, the police arrested him this afternoon. He was trying to induce the Mohammedan butchers to cease killing cattle as a protest against plague inspection. Some disturbance is expected in the bazaar to-night, so the chief constable is preventing strangers from going that way.'

'Surely no one would interfere with mere casual visitors?' I said.

My friend lay back in the carriage and laughed.

'Wouldn't they, indeed?' he cried. 'They would smash your skull with the utmost impartiality. You have come to a queer country, my dear fellow. But we will be quite safe in Colaba. There are guns and British bayonets in that direction.'

So my father's expectation of a 'gallop through the bazaar' was not so wildly fanciful after all. I began to grasp things dimly.

CHAPTER II

LA BELLE AMERICAINE

Whilst doing the sights of Bombay I encountered a Parsi youth.

India, in its languages as in its geographical features, shows differences as marked as Norway and Spain. My earlier linguistic studies were confined to Persian and Urdu. The Parsi's native tongue was Gujerati, of which I knew not a syllable.

So we spoke English to each other, and the curiously superficial education of the man amazed me. I mentioned the fact to Terrant. He instantly grew hot over the way in which the half-educated natives are superseding the poorer Europeans and Eurasians in the thousands of small clerkships of the Government offices, the banks, the railways, and the commercial houses.

'It is the future of the lower stratum of the really English-speaking population

which is fraught with grave significance to India,' he said. 'The official and military classes know nothing—absolutely nothing—about the conditions of life obtaining among their poor brethren. Of course there are exceptional cases. Some earnest-minded men and women do endeavour to alleviate the distress and relieve the sorrows of their less fortunate neighbours, but, I am afraid, the names of these throughout all India might be written comfortably on a sheet of note-paper.'

'Why, there's a woman,' he went on, glancing towards a well-dressed lady chatting with some friends at a little distance, 'she is the wife of a colonel in Lahore. She has lived in India for twelve years to my knowledge, and the only fact she realises about the poor whites and Eurasians is that they are to be avoided sedulously. She is not at all unkind or unfeeling. She nursed the men of her husband's regiment when they were dying by scores of cholera, but socially she tolerates no one outside her class, and that is a very narrow one.'

'Surely,' I said, 'people living in a small minority among foreign races must be

brought more together than would otherwise be the case?'

'I am telling you the sober truth,' replied the Judge. 'I know stations in India where, say, twenty civilians and officers and their wives lived for years among four hundred other Europeans of sorts, and out of the twenty ladies there was not one who knew the names of half a dozen of the larger batch. They are absolutely apart and distinct — much more than the aristocracy at home. As a matter of fact, the grandiose twenty were split up into four or five cliques which hated each other heartily; but that is another question.'

'All this is very strange,' I remarked, 'and, indeed, very unfortunate. May I ask how the average mem-sahib regards the natives?'

'The natives!' laughed the Judge, as though the idea tickled him hugely. 'She treats them as non-existent, except when she flicks them out of the way of her dog-cart with her whip. She will allow a *bearer*[1] or *khitmatgar*[2] to see her in a deshabille which would cause her to scream

[1] Valet. [2] Table servant.

murder in the case of an Englishman of even the lowest rank. She utterly ignores natives, and recognises no difference in individuals. A coolie and a raja are to her the same thing, unless the latter be of the Anglicised variety—one who gives big dances at Simla, and provides tiger-shooting parties.'

'Coming back to the question of education,' I said; 'why does the Government of India tolerate this absurd veneer of Western knowledge?'

Terrant smiled.

'Don't forget that you and I are a portion of the Government of India,' he murmured. 'We *must* do something of the sort. The difficulty is to assimilate the system of the race. Take an English public schoolboy of seventeen and contrast him with a student of the same age at an Indian University. The thoughts of the one are wrapped up in cricket and football; the other is racking his brains for apt quotations wherewith to adorn his speech on "The Evils of Early Marriage," or "The Desirability of the Opium Commission," at the next meeting of the Debating Society. At twenty the English-

man strives to be a Blue, whilst the Hindu thinks himself qualified to join the Legislative Council. Why? Answer me that riddle, and I will put the education question straight.'

But I preferred to watch a *garudi*, or snake-charmer, in the street beneath. He was causing a half-starved mongoose to bite a cobra whose poison-fangs had been extracted. The snake-charmer was aided and abetted in his pastime by sundry two-anna bits[1] flung from the balcony, and a crowd of grinning natives was marshalled in proper order by a yellow-hatted policeman.

There was great joy in life when the *garudi* slyly managed to allow the snake to wriggle close to the policeman's legs, and the latter fiercely clouted a small boy, who was laughing so heartily that he could not squirm out of the way in time.

'That was hardly fair,' I said. 'The fellow with the snake ought to receive the whacking; he did it purposely.'

'It's all a portion of the game,' laughed Terrant. 'The policeman demands *bakshish* for allowing the *tamasha-wala*[2] to perform. He skips away from the snake at every

[1] Twopenny silver coins. [2] Entertainer.

performance, and a kid gets hammered for effect. It is excellent make-believe, just like the Universities.'

If you follow this history, you will find I laid his remarks to heart. Our talk was interrupted at the moment by the arrival of the 'Belle Americaine.'

That is what we called her in the hotel, for she was American and pretty. The daughter of Mr. Hiram T. Potts could hardly fail to be peculiar in some respects, but this young lady was original right through. She was exceedingly well dressed always. She wore tan stockings and the tiniest of slippers, and her frocks were not too long to hide a highly arched instep. As, moreover, she never hesitated to prop her feet against the railings, or support them on the long arms of a peg chair, we had ample opportunities for admiring their shape and proportions.

Miss Dorothy H. Potts could chuckle in the best negro minstrel style of Pony Moore; she could whistle through her fingers like a *gamin*, and on one occasion she entertained a select circle of acquaintances with a variety of charming melodies extracted from a comb.

The Potts's suite was in the second story, immediately above the verandah, and it was no infrequent occurrence for Potts to lean over the rails of his private balcony in his shirt-sleeves—once in his Jaeger underclothing—and discuss the movements of the next few hours with his daughter, who would perch herself perilously on the balustrade beneath and shriek up her wishes to her 'poppa.' They were an odd pair; *outré* in many respects to English ideas, but so thoroughly fond of each other, so good-natured, that we could not help liking them. Moreover, Miss Potts was very nice and well-bred in her own way.

'What's the trouble, Miss Potts?' I said, for the puzzled look in her face presaged something unusual.

'Well, now, Mr. Wayne, that's just what I can't tell you. Sit down right here and I will try to explain.'

I sat down right there, and together we perused a remarkable set of verses entitled 'A Threnody on the Death of the Ahkoond of Swat.' They were in a current magazine, and ran somewhat in this style—

'What, what, what,
What's the news from Swat?

Sad news,
Bad news,
Comes by the cable led
Through the Indian Ocean bed,
Through the Persian Gulf, the Red
Sea and the Med-
Iterranean—he's dead;
The Ahkoond is dead!
For the Ahkoond I mourn,
Who wouldn't?
He strove to disregard the message stern,
But he Ahkoodn't.

Dead, dead, dead;
(Sorrow Swats!)
Swats wha hae wi' Ahkoond bled,
Swats whom he hath often led
Onward to a gory bed,
Or to victory,
As the case may be,
Sorrow Swats?
Tears shed,
Shed tears like water,
Your great Ahkoond is dead!
That Swats the matter!'

The verandah was full of people enjoying coffee and cigars. Potts was dozing peacefully, and most others were talking in the murmur peculiar to Anglo-Saxon hoteldom when our laughter at the absurd medley startled every one into looking at us.

The Judge, who had been joined by a tall soldierly man, with the unmistakable appearance of the British cavalry officer, turned towards us.

'Something appears to have tickled you, Wayne,' he said.

'I've got Quite hot Reading about the Ahkoond of Swat,' I answered.

'What is the joke?'

Miss Potts handed him the magazine.

'Oh,' he said, 'if you want to know anything about the Ahkoond of Swat, I have brought you the very man. Let me introduce to you my friend Dalrymple of the Guides. He was in the field against the dear defunct last year.'

Captain the Hon. Robert Dalrymple, son of Lord Ilfracombe, and heir to an estate encumbered for generations, took the chair I vacated, and forthwith succeeded in interesting the Potts family and myself.

He was a man who compelled recognition by his charm of manner. None of us knew at the moment either his social position or his brilliant record, but in five minutes he distinctly awed the vivacious Dorothy, whilst Potts, to use his own phrase, 'cottoned onter him somethin' wonderful.'

The Judge, much to my regret, left Bombay for his up-country station that night. I had a month's leave before joining my regiment, and I meant to use the time in sightseeing.

The four of us breakfasted together next morning, and the subsequent talk turned on the manner in which our newly-found friend intended to spend his furlough. He was going on a shooting trip in Hudson Bay Territory.

Potts knew the country. He was enlarging on the necessity for many stores and guides, etc., when the Honourable Robert said with a smile—

'Don't be too extravagant in your ideas, Mr. Potts. I am only a poor man.'

'What do you call "poor"?' cried Miss Potts.

'Well,' answered Dalrymple simply, 'I have my pay and a hundred a year which my father allows me out of an encumbered estate.'

She did not expect this outspoken declaration; it somewhat disconcerted her.

'Say,' she said suddenly, 'have you got the Victoria Cross?'

'Eh? Oh yes,' replied Dalrymple,

blushing as if she had detected him in some serious fault.

'I saw "V.C." after your name in a letter in the rack,' she explained. 'Where is it?'

'The letter? Here. A tailor's bill—receipted, for a wonder.'

'Don't be silly,' she cried, tapping the ground with her foot; 'I mean the Cross.'

'In my trunk.'

'Produce it at once. I want to see one.'

'Really, Miss Potts—I—er—really—don't know where it is.'

'You told me just this moment it was in your baggage. It aint civil to keep a lady waitin'.'

Without another word off strode the captain.

He returned with a small case, which he handed to Miss Potts, saying in a frank, schoolboy manner—

'There 's the lot.'

The 'lot' consisted of the Victoria Cross, the Egyptian and Soudan medals, with the Khedive's star and the Third Order of the Medjideh and a frontier medal. Miss Potts examined them all carefully. Holding up the small Maltese Cross bearing the significant words 'For Valour,' she said—

'What did you get this for, anyhow?'

'Oh! I saved a fellow's life in the last Miranzai campaign. By the way, isn't it time to be getting ready for our trip to Elephanta?'

'The boat leaves at 3.30,' said Potts, striking into the conversation, 'and it aint one o'clock yet. Besides, I allow I want ter hear the yarn connected with that bit of metal.'

Dalrymple glanced around to learn if anybody were observing him. He evidently considered his position a supremely embarrassing one. Escape was out of the question, so he told us the following story, stammering and blushing at first, but by and by warming to his subject:—

'Last cold weather an expedition was sent to the Upper Miranzai—a desolate region on the Afghan frontier, Miss Potts. We had a mountain battery, two regiments of native troops, two companies of the Scottish Rifles, and a few troopers from my own corps to act as scouts and orderlies. Our object was to destroy villages, obtain arms and hostages, and generally establish order in a very wild district, whilst punishing the authors of the preceding mischief.

We had reached a point about four miles distant from the chief village, and intended to storm it on the following morning. But, much to our surprise, we were stormed ourselves. I saw some rough work in the Soudan, but that day's fighting was as severe as I care ever to be in again. Towards evening the enemy made a last wild rush, and although our fellows were almost tired to death, we managed to drive them off. The fierceness of the assault, however, bulged in our square at a corner where the doctors were busy, and in a few minutes we discovered that Surgeon-Major Cameron, as fine a fellow as ever stepped, was missing, and had been carried off by the retreating enemy. To follow in the growing darkness was impossible, even if we had half a dozen men fit to make the attempt, so we gave up poor Cameron as lost.

'About ten o'clock, after we had managed to snatch a meal, we were stretching our tired limbs and enjoying a smoke, when a *mullah*—a Mohammedan priest, Miss Potts—yelled to us out of the darkness that, when the next day dawned, they would crucify the accursed Feringhi in their possession, and then wipe us off the face of the earth.

To put it literally, he said that the jackals would turn away surfeited from our corpses. For his predictions we cared little, because we knew the very reverse would happen; but his threat about Cameron made us shiver, for those fiends would certainly keep their word. We felt a bit sore, I can assure you. We could do nothing to help him. I kept thinking of our poor doctor until I could not stand it any longer, so I went to the Brigadier and asked his permission to attempt Cameron's rescue. He refused at first, but ultimately consented. With the aid of one of our Mohammedan officers, a splendid old fire-eater named Mohammed Khan—he is in your regiment, by the way, Wayne—I was soon rigged out *à la* Pathan, and I borrowed the tulwar of a dead tribesman who was lying among plenty of his kin in front of our zareba. This, with a couple of revolvers concealed beneath my flowing robes, constituted the whole of my appliances, and, I am afraid, of my plan also. If I could not save Cameron, I might at least get near him and give him the means of avoiding crucifixion.

'Well, after no end of blunders as to the route, and several narrow escapes from

being questioned, I found myself near the hill village where the tribesmen were encamped. They had no regular guard, as they knew we could not follow them. The road approaching the place was fairly good, but it twisted and turned in all directions as it climbed the side of a precipitous gorge, finally reaching a plateau about a thousand feet above the small stream which dashed through the valley beneath. The moon was struggling behind a great cloud-bank, but gave light enough to show the way and reveal objects close at hand. Nearing the village, I passed several scattered groups clustered round the embers of a fire, or huddled behind bundles of fodder, trying to obtain rest whilst they might. A lot of the natives were groaning, and their women were binding their wounds. I wandered on, still having no plan, when suddenly I came across Cameron, seated on the ground, with his hands apparently tied behind him, his back resting against a low mud hut, inside and in front of which were some twenty Pathans, a few smoking, the rest sleeping.

'I made up my mind for resolute action. I strode up to Cameron, growled some-

thing, spat at him, and then squatted on the ground. My actions, being quite natural, evoked no comment. In a minute or two I managed to whisper to him who I was, and that I had come to help him. Most men would have jumped at such a moment, but Cameron had nerves of steel. He only said—

'"Thanks, old chap. It's no use. My left ankle is sprained. I can't walk three yards, even if it were any good. Go back and give everybody my last remembrances. As for you, God bless you."

'For a moment I felt quite helpless, though, even if he could walk, I don't quite see now what he could have done. However, luck was in my way. At that moment a horse neighed loudly at some little distance, and a plan of action shot through my brain like lightning. From that moment I felt absolutely certain that both of us would escape. It seemed as if Providence were protecting us.

'I whispered again: "Can you manage to stand straight up when you hear a horse coming this way?"

'"Yes," he answered.

'"Very well. Be ready in five minutes."

'I rose, growled, expectorated at him again, and quitted the circle of light cast by the fire surrounded by his guard. I had little trouble in finding the horse which had whinnied a few seconds before. He was tied up in a rough shed, and, as well as I could judge, seemed to be a strong animal. I know him now to be the best Kabuli I ever rode. His saddle and head-gear were hanging close at hand, and I lost no time in getting him ready, although the queer Afghan bridle troubled me considerably. Then I led him out and mounted him, but at the same moment a fellow sprang up from the rear of the shed, where he had been sleeping, and demanded to know why, in the name of the Prophet, I was running off with his master's horse. There was no time for a long discourse, so I hit him such a smack on the head with the tulwar that he curled up quietly.

'Then the fun commenced. I rode to the hut at a canter, scattering the crowd round the fire right and left. I found Cameron standing up, swung him across the saddle in front of me, and started for home. The excitement on that hillside during the next ten minutes was something remarkable.

Jezails were fired, tom-toms beaten, gongs banged, and not a few Lee-Metford bullets whistled past us as we galloped down the pathway. Cameron is as tall as myself, so we were no light weight; but that little horse could have run away with two more of us. So far as I could judge, there were no other animals handy. No real attempt was made to stop us. Stragglers on the road in front cleared out of the way, thinking some horse had broken loose. In half an hour Cameron was in the hands of his own assistant doctors. I was drinking some hot whisky-punch, and the Kabuli was being groomed by about six men. The only real trouble we had was to avoid being shot by our own sentries.'

The straightforward narrative held us spellbound, and we hardly knew that Dalrymple had ended until he struck a match to relight his cigar.

'Jehosh!' cried Potts. 'That 's a powerful fine yarn.'

Miss Potts was silent. Her eyes were fixed on the small bit of metal which meant so much to its wearer. She was an impressionable girl, and the tears trembled in her long lashes.

The Honourable Robert did not know exactly what to do with himself, now that he had finished his recital. To relieve the situation he remarked, with knitted brows—

'It has always been a puzzle to me how that little horse didn't spring his fore tendons during the gallop down the defile with such a weight on his shoulders. But next morning he was as bright as paint, and carried me during the attack on the village, when we cleared 'em out like rats.'

Another pause.

'He must have b-been a good p-pony,' said Dorothy.

Dalrymple glanced sharply at her and blushed like a girl.

'Here have I been talking nonsense,' he blurted out, 'and throwing you late for tiffin. We shall never catch that boat!'

But we did.

While steaming up the harbour to the island of Elephanta I persuaded Captain Dalrymple to revert to the morning's topic.

'To one fresh from home,' I said, 'it is simply marvellous to meet fellow-countrymen who describe such events as though they were the minor details of life in the East.'

'The fact is,' he answered, 'people in England read the papers, but they don't realise the meaning of the news. They see: "Another expedition will be sent this cold season to operate near the Black Mountain," but they do not understand that the paragraph means a trying campaign for some thousands of men and the certain loss of several valuable lives. As for my affair, it was nothing.'

'By Jove!' he continued, his face lighting up as it had done at times during the relation of his own adventure, 'you ought to have seen poor Stuart that day among the Beluchis when the news came that his wife had bolted to Australia with some scoundrel or other. We were fighting in a small square, and rather hard pressed, when Stuart deliberately tried to commit suicide. That is to say, he calmly walked into the midst of the enemy and laid about them as coolly as though he were slashing a hedge. Of course that couldn't last long. Whilst he was running one fellow through, another hit at him with a tulwar as sharp as a razor. Stuart involuntarily put up his left arm to save his head, and the blow took his hand clean off at the wrist. He jabbed the

Beluchi so hard in the face with the naked stump that he knocked him down. A rush was made by some of his men and he was saved. He got the V.C.; but really, you know, he ought to have been cashiered, for it was a genuine bid for death. When the old boy looks at his stump now, he says, if he had been a wise man, he wouldn't have given his little finger for the sake of his runaway spouse.'

I sighed. It seemed to me that the adventures of India must be exhausted. There would not be any left for me. I had yet to meet Mohammed Khan!

The tide was high. We had little trouble in landing on the sloping causeway which descends in a series of stepping-stones into the sea. A steep climb up a road made, we are told, for the convenience of our present King—God bless him—when Prince of Wales, brought us to the principal cave, a large and ugly excavation in the solid rock. A superannuated guide took us in tow and began in the regulation voice—

'This, ladies and gentlemen, is one of the most remarkable places in the world.'

'What for?' asked Potts.

'As a rock temple,' answered the guide.

'It seems kinder out of repair,' said Potts.

We all laughed, and the guide looked somewhat discomfited. But he had his lesson by heart, so he rallied.

'Tradition asserts that this cave was excavated by djinns in a single night.'

'Say, mister,' interrupted Potts with much earnestness, 'hev' you got any of them diggers foolin' round now, 'cause I reckon they would hev' a sinch in Colorado.'

The guide ignored him.

'The most famous of the sculptures is the colossal three-faced bust at the back of the cave. It represents Siva in her threefold character of Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer. The three heads measure twenty-two feet nine inches round.'

'Where did she get her hat?' sang somebody.

But the guide was not to be gainsaid. He read us his lesson, collected his four-anna bits, and left us in peace. To my mind, the best thing to do in Elephanta is to turn your back on the caves and look at the magnificent panorama of sea, sky, and land. The island is a most delightful spot, and its quiet charm detained us for hours, until the little steamer ceased whistling from sheer

exhaustion. The Honourable Bob and Miss Potts apparently wandered all over the island, regardless of the cobras with which the unfrequented parts are said to abound.

Potts, from the force of habit, did some prospecting. It yielded but poor results.

'There's silver about here,' he told me confidentially; 'but it wouldn't pan out anyhow. That rock would cost six dollars a ton to crush.'

When, at last, we reached the landing-place, the tide had receded, and we had to walk some two hundred yards down the causeway. The stones were very slippery with slime and mud left by the retreating waves, and a fall might easily have been attended with serious consequences. Miss Potts, who wore smart French shoes with very high heels, supported herself by placing a hand on her father's shoulder, and Dalrymple came immediately behind.

All went well until we had nearly reached the boats, when Potts lost his balance and cannoned against his daughter, sending her flying into the sea of mud some six feet below—that is, she would have fallen into it had not a much more pleasant resting-place been provided.

Dalrymple, who realised what must happen when she lost her balance, jumped into the mud without a moment's hesitation and sank nearly up to his waist. He caught her quite easily, and held her in his arms high and dry until he managed to work his way near enough to the causeway to place her in safety. I could not help noticing that she drooped her head rather unnecessarily on his shoulder, but that might have been fancy.

We rescued Dalrymple, and he soused himself in the sea from the side of the boat to wash the mud off. Potts was profuse in his obligations, but the young lady herself said hardly anything.

On the way home we had some singing, and Miss Potts gave us a *chanson d'amour* in Provençal French, which she rendered with such skill and exquisite pathos as to astonish those who knew her only in her lighter moods.

Indeed, Potts remarked to me—

'The v'y'ge hez done that girl a power of good. I never heerd her sing like that before.'

I made some commonplace reply; but I did not agree with Mr. Potts that it was

solely owing to the 'v'y'ge' that this young song-bird trilled so sweetly.

'She could hev' bin a duchess or a princess,' went on Potts, 'but she didn't like the looks of either of 'em.'

'Not an English princess, surely?'

'No, no. I-talian. But I guess the dook was a Britisher all the time. He was a wizened-up sort of chap, dry ez a kipper, an' Dolly wouldn't look at him nohow.'

'I expect you have far too much sense to wish such a charming girl to marry solely for position.'

'You stand on me,' replied Potts oracularly. 'She'll hev' a million, will Dolly, an' I'm talkin' gold not silver. I hope she'll just hitch onter the man as will make her happy, whoever he be. I'll ante up enough for both to live on, if he isn't built for hustlin'?'

Late that evening Dalrymple joined me for a quiet cigar. He looked preoccupied, and did not say much. At last he broke out—

'I suppose that girl is infernally rich?'

'You refer to Miss Potts, I presume?'

This with a bland smile behind a cloud of smoke.

'Of course, who else? That is—yes—I mean Miss Potts. She is an heiress, I imagine?'

'I believe so. Her father told me to-day that he intends to settle a million sterling on her when she is married.'

'It's always the way,' he growled, savagely biting his moustache. 'Why can't a girl like her be as poor as anybody else?' Then he rose and stalked off to his room.

I said nothing about the dook or the I-talian prince. It was needless. What a pity it was that the Honourable but impecunious Robert should be leaving India just as the Potts's were entering it. Otherwise, who knows what might have happened?

CHAPTER III

HOW MOHAMMED KHAN BECAME INVULNERABLE

Dalrymple, very unwillingly, departed from Bombay for his shooting trip in far-off Canada. I was young then, and broken hearts were vain things, but I have reason to know that Miss Dorothy Potts did not begin to enjoy her Indian tour during many days thereafter.

After a ramble through Ahmedabad, Jeypur, and Rajputana generally, I joined my regiment and settled down to the serious business of soldiering. In a word, my life took a mighty stride onward. The mirage of India weakened and died away. In its stead came the true glamour of the East, and the Mentor of my Ulyssean wanderings was Sirdar Bahadur Mohammed Khan, rissaldar-major of the 2nd Bengal Lancers, to give him his full name, rank, and titles.

He was in every way a remarkable man,

and one who commanded respect the moment you looked at him. Six feet in height, straight as a lance and tough as a seasoned ash-plant, Mohammed Khan was truly a stalwart follower of the Prophet. A Punjabi Mussulman by birth, a soldier by descent, and a gentleman among his people, the fame of this redoubtable fire-eater had reached my ears before I met him, as you will remember that Dalrymple mentioned him at Bombay.

Mohammed Khan and I quickly became firm friends. I paid him the compliment of becoming an expert in his language, and he reciprocated my earnestness by looking after me with the fidelity of a watch-dog. Many times has he saved my life, many times helped me to official notice and promotion, so the least I can do in return is to become his chronicler.

The Sirdar was the living embodiment of the regimental tradition. Naturally, his co-religionists venerated him, and although the Hindus in the 2nd outnumbered the Mohammedans by three to one, he was as popular with them as with the minority. Weird stories were told of his prowess in the field, and his achievements in the wilder

forms of sport. Twice at least had he engaged in single combat with the champion of some border tribe, killing his opponent in full sight of both forces. His name was esteemed as greatly beyond the Indus as in the cavalry bazaar of the quiet station where we first met, and he was famous throughout Bengal as being the man who never stabbed a boar, but always felled him with a blow on the skull from an iron mallet.

The most mysterious attribute with which popular legend endowed him was that of invulnerability in battle.

'He is a lion among brave men,' a trooper would say, 'but steal or lead cannot touch him. He hath a *jadu*!'[1]

Russian soldiers, I have been told, often carry on their helmets a small image of some favourite saint, but Mohammed Khan's talisman was never seen.

'The Sirdar is keen as a Rajput tulwar,' said another *sowar*, 'and the edge cannot be blunted.'

One day my curiosity was unusually aroused by some such remark. When the late mess dinner was ended, I brought the

[1] A fetish or amulet.

rissaldar-major to my quarters on some pretext. After discussing the trivial business on which I had summoned him, I said casually—

'They tell me that you cannot be killed by an enemy, Mohammed Khan. Is that true?'

Now, the Sirdar impressed me as a native who was singularly free from superstition, and he absolutely astounded me by replying—

'It is true, sahib.'

His tone was serious and reverential, but the utter incongruity of the statement with the known life of this redoubtable fire-eater struck me as grotesque, and I laughed.

Whereupon he saluted, and said—

'You do not need me further, sahib. May I go?'

He was angry with me, for the first time, and I regretted my levity.

'Not so, Sirdar,' cried I. 'Come here into this quiet corner of the verandah, and smoke a cheroot. You won't take a peg, I know, but try some lemonade. You must tell me the reason of this strange belief, and convert an unbeliever.'

He smiled again. His two weaknesses

are a good cigar—a habit very unusual among men of his race—and revelling in reminiscence for the benefit of one who understands him and does not doubt his word. And here I may say, in parenthesis, that I believe every syllable I have written concerning him.

'It is a little-known tale, sahib,' he said, when we were comfortably settled. 'No one in the regiment, not even among my brothers, knows it, but I am glad to tell you, for although you laughed now, you will not laugh when I have finished. It is a long time to look back to the Mutiny, and I have seen and done many strange things in the forty odd years of service that leave me close on threescore in age to-day. I was nineteen when the news came to Multan that the revolt had started in Meerut, and soon every bazaar in the north-west was in a blaze. Even in this regiment, sahib, there was talk of killing the officers who had led us at Sobraon and Arracan.

'My father was then rissaldar-major, as I am now, and he had just bought me my horse, so that I might follow him in the fight. We swore to be true to our salt, whatever happened, and we were true, as

hundreds of Pandies knew to their cost before Delhi fell. Ah, sahib, the three days' looting of Delhi! It makes me young again to think of them. But of that another time—another time.

'After the first madness had passed, both parties settled down to real work. At Cawnpore, Lucknow, Agra, and Aligarh a stand was made. But it is written in your books, and you who were not born know more of these things than I, who went through them. That which I shall now tell you is not so written.

'We were then the 2nd Irregular Cavalry, and the small detachment which refused to follow the mutineers to Delhi was stationed in a mud fort twenty-three miles distant from Aligarh, chiefly for the purpose of helping the scattered *sahib-log*[1] in the outlying stations to escape. We rescued some, but the greater number were too late in flying for safety. Many were murdered, and there are the names of over a thousand of those who fell at that time carved in stone in one of your temples at Cawnpore, I have heard it said.

'At a little place called Dhoonga, many

[1] White people.

miles from our fort, there was a collector-sahib, with his mem-sahib, the mem-sahib's sister, and three little girls. The sahib had, long before the Mutiny year, taken notice of a Bengali youth and educated him as an office-wala. Therein he did wrong, for the Bengali is a snake, a man-cobra, and the people of my race treated him as such, before the Sirkar[1] said that the lives of all men, even Bengalis, must be respected.

'This Bengali ought to have been grateful, for he wore white linen and drank the best of *ghi*,[2] though he was born to be a coolie. But when the Pandies lost their senses, the Bengali thought the days of the *sahib-log* were numbered. So the son of a black pig whispered evil things in the bazaar. A rush was made on the collector-sahib's bungalow, and the sahib was knocked down and wounded. Then the Bengali smashed in his head with an axe, and would have slain the women-folk too, but the mem-sahib was desperately brave on behalf of her little ones.

'"Chandra Gupta," she cried, "you have slain your best friend. Kill me too, but spare the lives of my children!"

[1] The Government. [2] Clarified butter.

'The bazaar-born thief hated her for her courage, which smote his coward's heart, but he resolved to torture her with hope. He made her believe that she would be spared, and yet he meant to kill her and her sister and the small babies, at the moment when they thought they were safe. So he pretended to be sorry for his crime, and gave orders that they should not be molested, but should be allowed to see the sahib buried in the compound, and then pack some of their clothes and other articles on a bullock-cart.

'When these things were done, he sent them off under an armed guard towards our fort, with instructions that they should be taken at daybreak to within two miles of the gate, and there left, with their baggage placed on the side of the road until some one came to remove it for them. The mem-sahib, for the sake of her children, made an effort to thank her husband's murderer for his clemency, but she did not then know the full measure of a Bengali's treachery.

'The bullock-cart went slowly on through the night, and at last, as day dawned, the party reached the spot named by Chandra Gupta—whose bones were picked by kites.

At that hour the mutineers were quite safe from immediate pursuit. They knew we were so few in numbers that we could only venture to scout during the day, and for short distances. Besides, there was a thick jungle, with trees, ending at this place, whence the way to the fort was clear.

'The slayers of women—their ribs have long since been crunched by jackals—there were six of them in all, lifted out the mem-sahibs, and the children, who were so weary and sore that they could scarce walk. They piled up the packages close to a tree, and turned the bullock-cart as though to haste away.

'The two women took hold of the children's hands, and started to walk towards the fort, but they had not gone thirty yards before a musket-shot rang out, and a bullet whistled past them. Then a second, and a third, but still they were not touched, though their clothes were torn. They could not run. They were too feeble.

'The miss-sahib—she was but a girl, who had crossed the ocean only three months before, fainted, and fell to the ground like one dead.

'But the mem-sahib knelt on the dusty road, and strove to shield her children whilst she lifted up her hands to Heaven, and prayed to Allah—it is the same God for all of us, Sahib—to be merciful to her helpless little ones.

'The other three Pandy dogs now fired a volley, but Allah blinded their eyes and they missed again; so they ran forward to finish the business with the butt-ends of their muskets. Before they had gone a horse's length two of them were dead, and two others so stunned that they only recovered in time to be hanged. The remaining pair showed fight, and one of them must have knocked me off my horse if the mem-sahib had not clutched him round the throat with such good will that, after splitting open the other fellow's head, I jumped off, and choked him quite easily.'

The Sirdar paused for a moment to gulp down the excitement that had quickened his speech, and sent lightning into his eyes, whilst his breast heaved as though the last of the murderous gang were yet quivering beneath his fierce grasp.

I could not trust myself to utter a word. Perhaps I have not told Mohammed Khan's

story to do it justice. Yet, when I think of it, there comes to me the picture of that brave Englishwoman struggling to the bitter end, and offering herself as a final holocaust for her unprotected babes. There is infinite tenderness in the vision. There is a sob in it, too.

'You see, Sahib, it was this way,' continued Mohammed Khan in softer mood. 'I had been out on patrol the previous evening, and lost my way. As I did not know the country well, I hobbled my horse and slept until the first streaks of dawn showed in the east. I soon found I was much nearer the fort than I had imagined, and was cantering along the strip of grass by the roadside, when I suddenly came upon the mutineers, and you know the rest.'

'Yes,' I said after a pause. 'But I cannot quite see, Sirdar, how you account thereby for your everlasting safety in action?'

He shifted uneasily before he answered.

'When the affair was finished, sahib, I was going to stop the bullocks, which had wandered off. The mem-sahib—ah! she was a fine woman; no wonder the English are brave men when they have such

mothers — thinking her sister was shot, rushed to her side, but soon discovered she had only fainted. Then she gathered together her little flock, and came towards me. Before I could prevent her, she knelt down again, and they all prayed to Allah for me—for me, sahib, a man of another faith and of different colour. I knew not what they said, but they wept as they spoke, and the mem-sahib made each little child repeat the words after her. She told me afterwards that she asked the Great King of kings to safeguard me from all risks, to make me happy and prosperous, and to grant me a peaceful and honourable old age. She was sure that if Allah would not listen to her petition, He would assuredly incline to the prayers of the innocent children. And as she said so has it been. I believed it then, sahib, as I believe it now. But more than that, I now know it to be true!'

'What!' I exclaimed; 'is there more to tell?'

'Not to-night, sahib,' he replied, rising with a salute; 'I must go and inspect the quarter guard.'

The time soon came when I had good

reason to believe that my native comrade's confidence was not misplaced.

My regiment was ordered to the Tirah in the first year of my service. Beneath the copper-hued sky of a July afternoon it fell to my lot to witness and participate in the tragedy of Parachinar. We had halted after a series of desperate charges, when a familiar voice, quoting the sonorous verse of a Persian poet, said, with strange impassiveness at such a moment—

'A man meets with disaster when God wills it, but ofttimes, when the evil is complete, and wrought on his limbs with iron bands, it passeth away, if God wills it.'

'An odd time to think of poetry, Sirdar. But there is at least comfort in——'

I had no time to end the sentence. My mare, thoroughbred hunter though she was, staggered from sheer exhaustion, and I barely saved her from falling beneath my weight ere I slipped to the ground. I managed to revive her by pouring the contents of a waterbottle into my helmet, and the poor beast drew in fresh life with each gulp.

When the incident was ended Mohammed Khan answered me.

'Suli was a great man, sahib, a true believer. A fine corps, the 66th! They know how to die.'

Following his eager glance, I looked back through the gorge, and watched my gallant comrades of the line fighting as steadily as though they were manœuvring before carriage folk at home.

The final act of this drama of blood and death was drawing to a close. Guns, cavalry, and infantry were scurrying away from that fatal field, not beaten, but crushed. In the frenzy of this final rout they were obeying orders, as they had obeyed when they were jostled, early in the day, into an impossible position.

And now the 66th, two companies of them, were carrying out the last command they would receive on earth.

'You must cover the retreat,' shouted the general's galloper to the handful of Britons.

'For how long?'

The senior captain asked the question with a steady voice, but the brave hearts of his men must have throbbed a little faster as they waited for the answer.

'Until the guns have entered the defile.'

The aide-de-camp pointed with his sword to the narrow cleft three miles away, into which ambulance wagons, commissariat bullocks, transport mules, ammunition carts, and the remnants of a tempest-tossed army were crowding at a pace that threatened to block the rocky path for a week. And behind all were the four batteries which *must* be saved.

The man to whom he spoke bit his chin-strap, and the other leant over in his saddle.

'Good-bye, old chap,' he said as their hands met. Then he turned and spurred after the staff. As he passed us I saw two streaks on his cheeks, showing red through the brown of sweat and dirt.

We were stationed at the end of a level bit of ground, nearly a thousand yards from the 66th. When they were done with, it would be our turn. If we both failed, no white man would live to tell the story.

Over an hour we stood there, ready to mount and charge the pursuing Afridis who, held back for the time by the handful of infantry, might be expected at any moment to rush through and over the tiny knots that so stubbornly resisted them.

For the men of the 66th fought as they liked. Some lay down to it, some stood or knelt in loose formation to resist cavalry, some remained unconsciously alone, heeding naught but the necessity to load and fire.

The tribesmen chafed against the barrier.

They rained curses with their ill-directed volleys, but ever as we watched we could see the brown patches that marked Great Britain on the frontier map beating back the white-sheeted charge.

They became less and less, yet they never flinched nor ceased the struggle for a second. The minutes slipped by. Our horses got their wind again. The storm and stress of the bitter day's fight stiffened in our limbs as we waited our share in the closing scene, yet it came not.

Could we not go to help the 66th, and carry the remainder of them into safety? Not alone the colonel, but every *sowar* in the 2nd Bengal Cavalry cast doubting glances towards the pass in our rear.

By some marvel the press of fugitives was clearing itself. Already the leading guns of the first battery were hidden within the mountain shadows. In fifteen, ten minutes

more, the colonel could strain a point and ride to rescue the little remnant of our gallant comrades in front, for, once the mouth of the gorge had swallowed the main body, we could easily hold it against every Afridi in the field.

Girths were tightened; men and horses rattled themselves in their accoutrements. There was action in the air. At a sign from the colonel we were ready to sweep back through the valley and rescue the rearguard.

Five minutes passed. The colonel, dear old fellow, had almost resolved to risk it, and get a couple of guns to stop and help him with shrapnel and grape, when a fierce outburst of yells in the midst of the tribesmen caused every eye to seek an explanation from the swirl of dust and smoke of the combat in front.

From out the Afghan masses came a body of horse, fresh and keen as vultures in sight of their prey. Some thirty men of the 66th were now in the fighting line. They fired their last volley into the thick of the enemy's cavalry, and a moment later they were swallowed up in the vortex, whilst the hillmen closed in to complete by

murder what their cavalry had begun in fair fight.

No orders were needed now. The regiment was in the saddle before the colonel roared 'Mount!', and to this day I can hear the clatter of the iron-shod hoofs on the rocky plain as we rode to meet our opponents.

It seemed but an instant before we smashed into the shrieking and frenzied mob which dared to encounter the 2nd on equal terms. There is no joy on earth to measure with the joy of a cavalry fight. I hope some day to feel the scrunch of my squadron as it surges against the solid front of a Cossack sotnia—this was child's-play, a ride through a human rainstorm.

Nevertheless was there something of the mad tumult of battle in that brief combat as we cut and thrust into the white-covered cloud of Afridis that dissolved into mist before our charge.

The thing was over in a minute. I, as a squadron leader, my seniors in rank having been killed or wounded, had to keep a sharp look-out for the colonel's signals. When we reached the spot where the 66th had stood, we picked up those of our comrades

who lived and turned back, whilst the spatter of bullets on the rocks showed that we had not erred on the side of discretion.

Some fifty of the tribesmen managed to emerge in safety from the *mêlée*, and they were frantically striving, on horseback or afoot, to escape up the precipitous ravines that cut through the hills on both sides. We did not trouble about them. Our business now was to gain the defile and hold its mouth by dismounting our men until it was possible to ride after the retreating army.

Suddenly we noticed that the leader of the tribesmen—a chief of some consequence, judging by the richness of his attire—was approaching us. His horse had bolted almost to the truck of the hindmost gun, and indeed a bombardier of the 34th Field Battery fired at and missed him, unfortunately.

Two *sowars* rode out to cut him down, but the colonel, seeing that the man did not attempt to defend himself, shouted to them to halt. The scoundrel still came on at a walking pace. He made straight towards the colonel, who thought, as we all did, that he meant to surrender, but, being a personage of some importance,

declined to yield to a mere trooper and one of his own colour.

He was unarmed apparently, and when he was a horse's length distant our gallant chief spoke to him in Persian, telling him he was a prisoner. The Afridi answered nothing but bent forward in the saddle, whipped a revolver out of a holster, and shot the colonel through the heart.

Mohammed Khan noted his action and spurred his horse furiously forward to prevent its fatal sequel. But he was too late. The fanatical wretch fired the second chamber at the Sirdar, and my friend would have followed his noble commander into eternity had not his skittish country-bred, resenting the fierce use of the rowels, tossed his head in the air and received the bullet in his brain.

But, even as the animal shivered before he fell, the Sirdar struck. His sabre found the junction of the tribesman's neck and collar-bone, and the keen blade nearly severed his head from his shoulders. In the same instant the horse dropped and the men fell together.

Mohammed Khan alone arose. He spurned the chieftain's corpse with his boot.

'You dog!' he growled, and he looked to see if the gap he had made was large enough to let the man's life out.

I was almost choked with rage and grief, but it now devolved on me to think of others.

'Come, Sirdar,' I said, 'mount the colonel's charger and carry the colonel with you.' We did not yet know that he had died ere he reached the ground.

We escaped, leaving our dead to be hacked by the Ghazis and picked by kites.

In four days a flying column met us, so we retraced our steps. It was now our turn. The hillmen knew it and waited not. To force them into a general engagement was impossible. They became foxes, and the avengers split up into packs.

Our own particular hunt was the body of horse whose leader had cost us our chief's life. The scent was good and the earths stopped, so at last we overtook them.

All this time Sirdar Mohammed Khan rode the colonel's grey Arab, an unusually big and powerful horse for his breed. The rissaldar-major was as careful of his mount as a lady of a pet poodle. He groomed him, fed him, saddled him himself; and

many a mile he walked, when the pace permitted, to spare the splendid animal to the utmost extent.

When I asked him to explain this solicitude, he replied—

'It will please the colonel's mem-sahib to possess her husband's horse. She will weep, but the tears will be those of memory.'

We heard that the tribesmen awaited our attack at a village some eight miles ahead; they dared not retreat further in that direction, as the country beyond was held by another column. They outnumbered us by three to one, and if they got the better of the fight they might hope to escape.

'Good,' said the Sirdar when I told him the news. 'The rats are caught, then. They will soon be in Jehannum.'

Young as I was, the command had devolved temporarily on me, and I tried to make sure of my quarry. I halted the 2nd for the night, and next day moved cautiously enough towards the village, which was situated at the end of a long strip of level, cultivated land.

A small river tumbled through a deep-cut rocky bed on one side, flanking the houses,

and there was a straight and easy gallop into the place for the last half-mile.

Between the *nullah*[1] formed by the stream and the opposite mountain, a distance of one hundred yards, the enemy had thrown up a small defensive wall of no consequence—a boy could have jumped it.

Behind this primitive field-work a swarm of Afridis were massed on foot; some distance in the rear, among the scattered huts, were the remainder mounted, whilst half a mile away we could see the led horses of the cut-throats who lined the wall.

The formation puzzled me. It had an air of absurd confidence that suggested a hidden motive. An ambuscade or flank attack was out of the question. The thing was too simple, so I halted my squadrons and called my brother officers for a brief consultation.

They agreed with me that our obvious course was to advance at a sharp trot, breaking into a gallop at a short distance, and pitch head-foremost into our opponents. Against arms of precision the scheme would be madness. Against jezails and matchlocks it was less dangerous than crossing a plain eaten with rat-holes.

[1] Ravine.

'What think you, Mohammed Khan?'

I well knew the value of his advice, for we youngsters were fresh to the war game.

'There is no other way, sahib. They will run ere they see the whites of our eyes.'

But they did *not* run.

As I shoved my feet home in the stirrups and tickled my mare with the left spur, I saw that the enemy stood their ground. They were firing wildly, but they did not budge.

My doubts could not live with the strides of my gallant charger.

Casting one glance behind to see that the leading troop was well in hand, I eased the reins a little, and felt the sish of the air until it drowned the noise of the firing.

At this instant the Sirdar drew level.

'Back!' I yelled. 'This is my place!'

But the man neither answered nor obeyed. Even in the madness of the ride I could see that his eyes were fixed, and his dark skin was pallid. When a native of India blanches he shows it worse than a European—he becomes a dirty grey. The Sirdar afraid! Nonsense! Yet why that expression of awe—it seemed to me terror—and how came such an incomparable

horseman to be unable to restrain a bolting Arab, such an experienced soldier to disobey orders?

There was no time to think. Barely a hundred and fifty yards away was the low fortification, with its frieze of yelling demons, so strangely resolute in their attitude.

Although travelling my best on a hunter which had twice led the field in a forty minutes' unchecked run behind the Quorn, Mohammed Khan distanced me four lengths in twenty strides.

Up went his sabre with a quick wave to the left, and in the same second the Arab inclined to the point where the wall ran into the precipitous hillside.

A feeling of rage possessed me. How dared he do this thing—direct *my* regiment! Had I been near enough I verily believe I would have cut him down.

I followed him, using wild words, and the troop, taking heed of us both, swerved into the new and narrower line of the charge.

Behold! We were yet a pistol-shot distant when the tribesmen broke and fled as though they had been struck by a

thunderbolt. It seemed but the flash of a lance pennant, and we were crushing them beneath our horses' feet; another, and we were among the mounted contingent!

The business was soon over. I was looking for Mohammed Khan to place him under arrest prior to a court-martial, when Hilliard, leader of the rear squadron, came to me.

'Wayne,' he said, 'this is a bad business; I have lost half a troop in men and more horses.'

'How the——?'

'Come and see.'

I mistrusted my senses when I looked over the breastwork which the Afridis had held with such seeming boldness. There, in front, right in our proper path, was a deep and wide trench, the toil of a thousand men during the previous night. From its depths the *sowars* were even now extricating frightened horses and maimed or dying men, whilst a *débris* of poles and matting, littered with earth and leaves, showed how the death-trap had been concealed.

The rear troop, seeing the way clear as they thought, had ridden straight to the front instead of following the oblique course

set by the others, and had tumbled headlong into the excavation. For those who led there was no hope. The next rank jumped bodily on top of them. The regiment had sustained the casualty list of a severe battle.

Why had we all escaped the same fate? Why was not I lying there dead, broken, and suffocated beneath the weight of my whole squadron?

'Allah willed it, sahib. He alone could guide us to-day.'

Mohammed Khan's voice roused me from a stupor of grief, for it was a pitiable sight.

'Tell me, Sirdar,' I said, 'how came you to avoid this pit?'

'I know not, sahib; it was my horse, not I. He carried Another beside me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sahib, you are wiser than I. Who am I that I should speak my thoughts?'

'But it was *you* who led the charge.'

'No, sahib. I was of no more account than a blade of grass swayed by the wind. It was not *my* hand that pressed the reins; not *my* will that caused me to signal a change of front.'

'Then whose was it?'

'Allah is Allah. Who shall understand His ways? Perhaps, if the colonel-sahib's horse could speak he might instruct us.'

I started at his words. The colonel's Arab was contentedly chewing the tops of some millet plants. There was nothing eerie in his quiet browsing, yet was the matter strange beyond belief.

We turned to examine the line of our advance. A broad *chaussée* had been provided on the extreme left of the wall to enable the enemy's mounted section to ride forth and complete our destruction when we were committed to irretrievable ruin by the masked ditch.

Not until the tribesmen saw us deviating from the natural approach did they bolt. They had better cause to be astounded than I, even whilst I railed at Mohammed Khan.

'The thing is a mystery, and will remain one for ever,' I murmured.

The words were in English, and the Sirdar could not follow them.

But he understood my face and tone.

'The reason is clear enough, though the means are invisible, sahib.'

'Nay, Mohammed Khan. Surely it is

the reverse. There is our path, but why did we follow it?'

'Because, sahib, even if an Afridi dog could slay the colonel—whom may Allah greet—he could not slay his spirit. It was the colonel's horse that led the charge; he it was who saved the regiment, and *I* did not guide him.'

So we left it at that.

CHAPTER IV

HOW THE SIRDAR PREVENTED A GREAT WAR

But for the accidental circumstance of the Ameer being in my camp at Rawalpindi, and the fortunate fact of his being a prince of great capacity, experience, and calm judgment, the incident of Gilgit *alone*, in the strained condition of the relations which then existed between Russia and Great Britain, might *of itself* have proved the occasion of a long and miserable war.—*Speech of an Indian Viceroy.*

The public utterances of a great diplomatist are weighed more carefully than grains of gold—once placed in currency they cannot be remeasured. Gilgit was serious enough—all the world knows that; the other occurrences, indicated by the words I have italicised, were fraught with far more danger, and they are known but to few.

I was in Rawalpindi on special duty when the Ameer journeyed thither in state to meet the Viceroy. My business was pressing enough in all conscience. It has pleased

Providence to endow me with some talent for languages, as I have already told you, and I made a special study of the Persian dialect used by the fakirs, or religious mendicants of Northern Indian. There is an outlaw colony of these frightful ruffians, the scum of Hinduism, in a remote valley of the Black Mountain, within the Hazara region, that fertile breeding-ground of revolt, rapine, and organised outrage. I encountered one of its leaders in Bombay ere I had been in India twelve hours.

Some of these gentry were expected to revisit the land of their birth—India—in the guise of camp followers attached to the Afghan monarch's retinue. They are the principal agents of Russian intrigue north of the Indus, so the frontier police were enjoined to keep a watchful eye on suspects, whilst I was asked to give my linguistic aid to the authorities.

The affair promised adventure. I readily consented, only stipulating for the assistance of the Sirdar. His judgment I personally had unbounded faith in, his loyalty was beyond question, and his zest for the occupation was as keen as the razor edge of a Rajput tulwar. Your good Mussulman

loves a Hindu fakir with the affection of a cat for a mouse.

I made some show as an enthusiastic globe-trotter with a passion for inspecting Hindu temples—the part cost me a superb moustache—whilst the Sirdar did a roaring trade in the bazaar as a purchaser of rare skins. The cute old swashbuckler made money out of his rôle, and I spent more than my expenses—but no matter.

His Highness the Ameer rode into Rawalpindi with brave display. His cavalry guard wore bright orange tunics, blue breeches, and long, shiny, Russian boots, and a greater figure than Abdurrahman Khan himself was cut by his chief executioner, attired in red velvet, with the strangulation rope tightly twisted round his waist to support the beheading axe.

That evening the Sirdar came to sell me the fur of a silver fox. I heard him wrangling in the verandah with my new servant about the commission on the expected deal, and casting reflections on the character of Abdul Khan's female relations, when a demand was made for more than two annas in the rupee.

'But the English sahib is a fool,' ex-

plained Abdul Khan. 'He knows not the difference between five rupees and ten.'

'How so, bazaar-born one?' came the deep guttural of the Sirdar.

'Because I gave him ten rupees for an English gold piece, and he only smiled.'

'Ha! If he smiles when he buys this skin I will give thee three annas.'

Abdul Khan did not smile when he and I squared accounts a month later. We were then in my own quarters at Delhi. I retained the man, as he was the only servant I ever possessed who could clean brown boots. He was too astonished to speak after he heard the first sentences in Urdu of my version of the cash balance between us.

I sent him out on some pretext, whereupon he explained, *sotte voce*, to the Sirdar, that he would call for his *dasturi*[1] next day.

We were alone, but time pressed. The silver fox became my property in dumb show, and Mohammed Khan murmured—

'I have news, protector of the poor.'

'Well, tell me quickly.'

'The King of kings has strange tastes for a man who deals with his enemies as he

[1] Commission; literally 'custom.'

does. He spends two hours daily after the morning prayer in arranging cut flowers like a mem-sahib.'

'Yes.'

'A man has often met with his death through sweet-scented plants, Sahib.'

I feared interruption, but the Sirdar must tell his tale in his own way.

'The Lord-Sahib[1] has ordered many flowers from the gardeners, and the head of these is a Hindu. One who is charged with the purchase of forage receives the flowers. He is a Kabuli, and he has already visited the friends of Yakub Khan.'

This was startling news, for Yakub Khan was a claimant to the throne of Kabul and a pensioner of the Government of India.

'This Kabuli has a follower who is unknown to his fellow-servants. He swears by the Prophet, but I have seen him worshipping the monkey-god in Benares. And, sahib, the monkey-god is here.'

'Here! What do you mean?'

'The image of Hanumàn has been secretly conveyed from his temple on the banks of the Ganges, and is now hidden in an old building in the bazaar.'

[1] The Viceroy.

Here was sensation with a vengeance. The most fanatical section of the Hindu priesthood would never have permitted such desecration of the holiest spot in Benares, a town nearly fifteen hundred miles distant, without some powerful motive. Between Benares and the Black Mountain colony there has ever existed open sympathy and secret communication.

'Sirdar,' I said, 'we must see those flowers before the Ameer touches them. Meet me, as though by accident, near the camp at eight to-morrow morning.'

Mohammed Khan left me with loud protestations that after many such bargains he would be a ruined man.

That night I had a long conversation with Hale, the superintendent of police. At the appointed hour next day I sauntered past the English sentry posted at the door of the Ameer's reception marque. He had his instructions, and took no notice of Hale or myself, nor did he challenge Mohammed Khan when he approached. Within the tent, in three wicker baskets, was a superb collection of cut flowers, notable among them being a magnificent bouquet of Marie Vanhoot roses.

No one could fail to be attracted by their beauty. I stooped to inhale their delicate fragrance, but the Sirdar caught me roughly and dragged me back.

'Not so, sahib,' he growled. 'Better the Ameer than you.'

Hale laughed at the old man's caution.

'It is quite a case of Catherine de Medicis,' he said, but the allusion was naturally lost on my comrade.

Mohammed Khan clearly thought it no laughing matter.

'There are other ways,' he explained. He pulled out of his breast a small fox-terrier puppy, which he held towards the roses, and the dog at once sniffed them eagerly in the manner of his race and age.

Our companion watched the animal keenly for a minute, but the puppy was obviously none the worse. Then the Sirdar gingerly sniffed the flowers himself.

'It is well, so far,' he muttered.

'These roses, sahiba,' he went on, 'were gathered this morning at five o'clock. They were taken at once to the abode of Hahumàn, covered with a cloth, and brought back in the same way at six. Then they were conveyed hither by the

Hindu of whom I have spoken. We must examine them.'

He placed the puppy on the carpeted floor, and carefully unfastened the string which bound the bouquet. Although loosened in the circumference, it seemed to be caught in the interior. He would not prise the stems apart with his fingers, but sought the aid of Hale's riding-whip.

At last the fragrant mass fell apart, and the three of us jumped back with a cry of horror. A small black snake, which we instantly recognised as a *Karait*, more deadly even than the dreaded cobra, leapt on to the table which bore the baskets, its lithe body writhing and its eyes shooting fire, for it was enraged by the tugging at the string which had fastened its coils in the centre of the flowers.

Mohammed Khan struck at it with the whip, and knocked it, with dislocated vertebræ, some distance across the tent, where it fell upon the dog. Alas, poor puppy! He lay down to die, whilst the Sirdar was crushing the *Karait's* head.

Personally, I confess, I was unnerved by the incident. I hate snakes. Hale, too, was a bit shaken. Each of us had had a

providential escape, as this particular species of reptile is not only venomous in concentrated degree, but spiteful and ferocious if threatened. It has been known to spring forward to attack an unconscious intruder —a rare trait in snakes, most happily—and its bite is invariably fatal.

And these were the roses which, within the hour, the Afghan potentate would find delight in, whilst he arranged them in the many costly vases scattered about the tent.

Mohammed Khan was less concerned in his examination of the two remaining baskets. When he was satisfied, he tied up the whole collection as before.

'Why trouble, Sirdar?' said Hale. 'This matter must be reported to the Viceroy, and all these infernal scoundrels seized forthwith.'

The rissaldar-major was silent, but he looked at me anxiously, and I knew that he had some suggestion to offer, so I bade him speak.

'If a stir be made in the bazaar, sahiba, it will warn many whom we do not now know. They may become desperate, and plan open violence; whereas, if we three keep closed mouths and open eyes, we may

learn more of their plots. They will think this one has failed through some mischance, and it will render them more confident. These men cannot be fought with steel.'

Hale and I hastily agreed that he was right. The Sirdar placed the snake and the dead puppy in my handkerchief, and we quitted the tent. Outside the line of sentries Mohammed Khan's restless glance fell on the squatting form of the Hindu attendant, he who swore by the Prophet, awaiting developments.

'That man must not get away,' he growled.

Hale called two native policemen, and they marched the Hindu off.

'What will you do with him?' I inquired.

'I told them to give him six months.'

'On what charge?'

'You can leave that to them. He will get the six months all right.'

Events now marched apace. Mohammed Khan learned, through mysterious agents whom I never met, that the devotees of the monkey-god were convinced that their missing accomplice had played them false, but my astute associate was utterly at a loss to ascertain their next move. Hale

took care that the Viceroy's own staff provided the Ameer's flowers during the remainder of the visit.

In three days' time a grand durbar would take place, and my old friend had a fixed idea that the efforts of the conspirators would centre round that event. He revolved some notion in his mind for hours, and finally asked me to meet him at a house in the bazaar next morning. I agreed, kept the appointment, and a little later strode forth in his company with face and hands darkened by a liberal liniment of walnut juice, my hair thick with lamp-black and oil, and my form shrouded in the flowing garments of a Pathan.

Ere long we were gazing curiously at the gigantic figure of the monkey-god. The tenement where he was housed was deserted at that hour. None but a secret circle knew of the presence of Hanumàn in the Mohammedan city; few would have believed the fact were it published in every print in India.

The idol was a horrible grotesque, carved from ebony and gilded. Its eyes were formed of two priceless emeralds, large as good-sized marbles, and scintillating with

phosphorescent gleams in the semi-darkness of the room.

We examined the place carefully, but its crude construction and gaunt walls gave no hope of successful eaves-dropping. The Sirdar was apparently already aware of this drawback, as he devoted his attention to a keen scrutiny of the idol.

We both wondered how the Hindu zealots had conveyed such an unwieldy mass by rail without attracting attention. Whilst discussing the point, we took hold of it in order to estimate its weight, and naturally exercised considerable muscular power in the effort. As a result, we both stumbled, and narrowly avoided smashing the god to pieces. It was perfectly hollow, and wondrous light from the dryness of the wood. Although the pair of us were far above the average height, we could just squeeze into the interior.

There was no need for words. Each understood the other's look.

Next evening, Hale accompanied us to the house, and with him a number of trusted subordinates. Through a chink we saw a semi-naked fakir prostrated in adoration before the image. Ere he could rise, he

was pounced upon, gagged, and led off to join the Hindu who gabbled of Mecca. It was Ram Singh, my Bombay acquaintance!

Mohammed Khan and I made ourselves as comfortable as a cramped squatting in the environment of Hanumàn would permit. We were well armed, and secure in the knowledge that the first pistol-shot would bring prompt aid.

So admirable was the workmanship that not a crack or joint gave us sight of external proceedings, but we could breathe and hear perfectly.

Time passed, and I was becoming intolerably stiff, whilst the scrunching of the Sirdar's jaws as he chewed betel-nut grated on my nerves. Suddenly these annoyances vanished.

Some one had entered. Others followed, and we knew by the sounds that they were doing *puja*[1] to the king of the monkeys.

And now I blessed my studious wrestling with the strange tongues of the East. Even my native friend could not follow in its entirety the quaint patois of the Bengali Hindus.

'Where is Prāg?' came a voice.

[1] Worship.

'I know not. He left me to come hither after the midday meal.'

'It bodes ill for our work,' said the first speaker. 'Prāg has vanished like our brother from Kabul. Is aught known at the *Kotwal*?'[1]

'Nothing,' said a new speaker, whom the Sirdar identified as the forage provider who favoured the pretender. 'They are Shia dogs, the police. They only know it is day when they see the sun.'

The conversation proceeded in low tones, and I gathered that it was imperatively necessary for the conspirators to murder the Ameer whilst he was in British territory. Alikhanoff and his Cossacks were ready to take the field, and the Afghans would rise at once when it became known that the English had killed their ruler, as such would be their fixed belief. Every native prince in India would become alarmed for his own safety, and take part against the Feringhees. In a word, British rule in India would vanish. Had not the saint of Ajudhia prophesied that within a hundred years Hindustàn would again be governed by its own peoples?

[1] Head police-office.

It was a deep-laid scheme. No wonder the Viceroy pondered his words uttered to the Legislative Council eight months afterwards.

Again came the Mussulman voice—

'We must use the thing given us by the Russian at Kabul. It was meant for his own prince, and it will serve here.'

Some article was produced and silently examined. We should have been at a loss to understand its nature, had not the man explained—

'It is filled with strong powder, stronger far than that used in guns, and by placing caps on these nipples it must explode on touching the ground if thrown a little way. It will kill every one within the width of a street.'

Several quick movements of slippered feet gave eloquent testimony to the manner in which the dynamite bomb was received by the select gathering in front. Even I found myself reflecting that the ebony god was confoundedly thin.

But the dealer in forage and other wares calmed his companions by explaining that the absence of percussion caps rendered the missile harmless.

It was soon settled that the bomb should be thrown at the Ameer's carriage from a certain house when he drove through the bazaar after meeting the Viceroy next day. In the confusion the plotters felt assured they could easily escape from the rear of the premises.

I would now have overturned the effigy and rushed at them, but Mohammed Khan restrained me, though my joints were cracking, and my backbone ached like a frenzied tooth.

The Mohammedan went out, and elaborate homage was paid to Hanumàn for his all-powerful aid in disposing of the English. To the Hindus the Ameer's death was a mere item in the programme.

At last they were gone and we could stretch our limbs. Hale was astounded when he heard our budget.

'Why didn't you kick up a row?' he said eagerly. 'Not one of them could have escaped. I had twenty men posted at every possible avenue.'

'The thing would have become known, sahib, and it would not have been pleasing to either the Lord-Sahib or the Ameer,' interposed the Sirdar, guessing the purport

of Hale's question. 'As it is, you will no doubt quietly change the way to be followed by the carriages at the last moment.'

'And let these scoundrels escape!' cried Hale.

'They shall not escape, sahib. To-morrow's dawn will be their last.'

Hale was not convinced; nevertheless, Mohammed Khan's counsel had alone prevented the success of the plot against our distinguished visitor, so he unwillingly yielded.

Next day I did not see the rissaldar-major. I was perplexed, but comforted by the knowledge that he was occupied with his preparations for surprising the monkey-worshippers.

He *did* surprise them, and I subsequently realised that he did not want my complicity in his method.

As the time drew near for the return of the Afghan monarch from the durbàr, I could not restrain my curiosity, but strolled forth, in my sightseeing rôle, to the vicinity of the house fixed upon as the scene of the bomb-throwing exploit. The street was packed with natives. When loud shouts some distance away announced

the approach of the royal cortège I became anxious. What if Hale's arrangements had broken down? Candidly, for the first and only time in my life, I became hot with fear.

But Hale himself was heading the procession with a body of mounted police, and cries of astonishment came from the people as the party swerved off into another thoroughfare. A rush was made to the junction of the streets, and I was left almost alone.

I looked at the house to see how the inmates of its fate-laden upper story would act in view of this unexpected development, when, at this moment, I could have sworn that either Mohammed Khan, or his double, halted in front of the place, hurriedly lit a match, stooped and applied it to something at the base of the house that hissed with momentary fire. The man then made off.

From the upper windows a number of muffled figures were gesticulating towards the disappearing procession. Then, with a dull roar, the building collapsed amidst a cloud of dust, whilst a second and much more violent explosion hurled laths and plaster and bricks in all directions.

I cannot actually say why the crazy tenement blew up in the first instance, but I am quite sure as to the cause of the succeeding disaster, for any man can tell the difference between the sound of gunpowder and dynamite.

The *Civil and Military Gazette* briefly announced that a house had fallen in the bazaar at Rawalpindi with considerable loss of life—the result of overcrowding to witness the Ameer's passage through the town. His Highness Abdurrahman Khan soon afterwards rode north to the Khaibar Pass.

Mohammed Khan received from the Government Rs. 2000, and the promise of a double pension when he retired, whilst Hale and I had nice things said to us by the authorities.

Quite two months later the Sirdar entered my quarters at Meerut, and fidgeted about with aimless talk. Finally he came to the point.

'Sahib, is there a miss-sahib in England whom you may bring to join the regiment some day?'

'I have not met the lady yet. But what of it?'

'Well, sahib, this will make her a ring of which no mem-sahib in India would have the like.'

He produced a magnificent emerald—a stone so valuable that I was long puzzled to know how to safeguard it—and quitted the room with a hasty explanation that the recruits were weak in the sword exercise. He must see to their drill at once.

I never asked him where the other one was.

CHAPTER V

THE TÀJ—AND A FORTUNE-TELLER

For a little while Mohammed Khan and I were on the shelf. That is to say, we were busily engaged in regimental work; my second cold weather in India found me admitted to the Staff Corps and my foot firmly planted on the first rung of the professional ladder.

I was not a little delighted and surprised one day to receive this letter from Dalrymple :—

'Dear Wayne,—Can you arrange ten days' leave and join me at Agra? You will remember Miss Potts and her father. They are visiting India again this year, and have invited me to meet them at Laurie's Hotel on the 11th inst. (December). They also ask me to find out your whereabouts and get you to make one of the party. If all I hear about your exploits at Rawalpindi be true, you should be able to get

round the Colonel, no matter how busy the regiment may be.—Yours sincerely,

ROBERT DALRYMPLE.'

I smiled. There was not a word of Miss Dorothy's artfulness in 'getting round' her 'poppa' to take the tremendous journey from the United States to the Coral Strand a second time.

My colonel was not obdurate. In due course I arrived at Agra, a place hitherto but a name to me.

Potts was hale and hearty as ever, Dalrymple a shade more reserved, Miss Potts greatly toned down. Indeed, the younger pair had scarce recovered from the shock of meeting each other again.

But they were kindness personified.

'Now, Mr. Wayne,' cried Dorothy, after the first torrent of questions had been asked and answered, 'we have kept the Tàj and the Fort until you arrived. It is so absurd. We have been here two whole days. People think we are lunatics. It is the thing in Agra to drive to the Tàj from the railway station and send your baggage unaccompanied to the hotel. So everybody wonders what we've found to do during the last forty-eight hours.'

To my credit be it said, I never even looked at Dalrymple. Anyhow, to the Tàj we went then, without a moment's further delay.

No, I am not going to describe it. There are many reasons against my attempting any such iniquity. First and unanswerable, I am absolutely unable to do so; second and opinionative, I do not believe the man breathes who could do justice in words to the Tàj.

It were an easy task to pile up sentences over a ground-plan of the mausoleum and its precincts. But is there a polysyllabic adjective even in the language of Heine that would make those who have never been to Agra understand the effect of that first glimpse of the white marble shimmering in the sunlight amidst the deep green of the trees?

With true dramatic effect the architect has willed that you shall first set eyes on his jewel when framed in the noble moulding of the dark red sandstone garden gate, and the effect on me was that I wanted to stand there for hours, drinking in a delicious impression of superb beauty.

The Tàj has an influence absolutely apart

from all other architectural triumphs. St. Peter's at Rome, the Cathedral at Cologne, our own York Minster, have a grand solemnity which expands the human mind. It is impossible to resist their religious influence. They appeal to the spirituality of the soul in subdued and soothing chords. A man or a woman with a great grief cannot fail to derive consolation from their mere entourage. There was a divinity in the genius which moulded those stones into colossal magnificence, which demands the calm reverence of the beholder. In the Tàj there is nothing of this. It has been well called a 'dream in marble,' and surely the phrase is happy.

'What do you think of it,' said I to Potts. It was a commonplace remark; the ordinary verbal stock of the admiration-monger was utterly out of place there.

'It's powerful fine,' replied Potts, 'but it's beyond me'; and by those simple words the old gentleman meant more, perhaps, than the brilliant spoken picture of a Royal Academician.

Miss Potts sank to a seat in the garden and wept.

The Honourable Robert nearly choked a guide who came and offered his services.

We lingered long in every nook, and noted each dimple in the lovely face of the tomb itself. Yet 'tomb' is a ridiculous word to use in regard to the Tàj. Never did lover offer his mistress a brighter jewel than Shah Jahàn dedicated to the memory of Mumtaz Mahàl, the 'Pride of the Palace.'

No fairer gem has ever decked a queenly brow than this marble diadem, which would seem to consecrate the Persian lady to an eternity of roses and pearls and bright skies —with laughter and kisses rippling through all.

It is hard for us to understand, looking as we do with insolent carelessness at the Begums and Ranis and Princesses of such Indian chiefs as are nowadays open to the public gaze, the true position of those women in the old times. The aunt of the good lady who lies beneath the Tàj was Nurjehàn, the empress-wife of Jahàngir. They were both of good stock, and must have been beauties of no mean degree, and their influence on the public life of the period is a matter of historical record.

Then, again, who designed the Tàj? Thoroughly Eastern in tone, there is yet a delicacy of finish, a conformity of outline, suggesting the master-hand of one trained in Italy. It is a strange commentary on the insignificance of an individual compared with his work, that the men who created two of the most noted buildings in the world, the Tàj and the Alhambra, should be utterly unknown to us.

There is but one item missing — the silver doors at the entrance—which were taken away and melted by Suràj Mal at the head of some marauding Jàts. If the ghost of the Mogul monarch flits through the great doorway on moonlight nights, whilst the white mist from the Jumna rises and forms a timely shroud, how he must blight the memory of Suràj Mal!

For if there is one thing in which your true Mohammedan can excel mankind, it is in cursing. Words which sound perfectly awful when said by one Englishman to another are mild pleasantries to a Mussulman, something on a par with our 'Confound you!' When the follower of the Prophet really wants to use bad language, he succeeds. Boccaccio might have bor-

rowed some useful phrases by simply listening to a good, sound, well-delivered Asiatic swear.

To do Shah Jahàn justice, however, in his corporeal form, he did not perpetuate bad language. The portals and other conspicuous parts of the various buildings which make up the *tout ensemble* of the Tàj Mahàl are crowded with Arabic or Persian quotations from the Koràn. It is worthy of note that where such inscriptions, inlaid in black on white marble, would have a distinctly inartistic effect in Roman characters, the flowing script of the East blends with the other ornamentation in quiet harmony.

We saw the Tàj in every light—by the first glow of advancing day—in the all-powerful glare of the midday sun—in the purple half-light of evening so peculiar to the plains of India—and at night, when the moon silver-gilded the sandstone and converted the Tàj itself into a gigantic pearl. Never again, perchance, during my earthly pilgrimage will my mortal eyes rest on that fairy mosque, but often will the windows of my soul admit the radiant vision.

It is something to have lived and seen at

least a few of the beauties of mother-earth. With the memory of the Tàj I treasure, in my very own little art gallery, the sunrise on the Alps as viewed from the Grands Mulets, the moonlit Cathedral at Milan, the lifting of a springtide mist off Snowdon as you drive through the pass of Llanberis, the myriad ripples of the sea beneath the stars on a summer night in New York Bay. These, and a few other gracious pictures, glimpsed when the curtain lifts from the magic mirror, are to me what the fumes of the poppy are to the opium-eater. They constitute my private paradise, into which I glance at times, opening ever such a wee wicket for the purpose, fearful lest too ardent inspection may prove it a mirage.

'I guess it 's about tiffin-time,' said Potts.

I glared at him, but he was right. It *was* tiffin-time, and, after all, Paradise is a place where roast geese fly about with tureens of gravy in their mouths, and cry, 'Eat us!' So says Heine.

That afternoon we did—I thank Miss Dorothy for the word—the Fort. There is no mistaking the Fort at Agra. It looks every inch a fort. None of your miserable

little earthworks, so insignificant to the eye and so difficult to tackle, but a real grand fortress, with embattled towers and embrasured walls rising in tiers of rich red sandstone from the banks of the Jumna. Modern artillery would soon make a sad mess of it; let us hope it will be allowed to continue its ornamental purposes without having its utility tested.

After the *grand coup* of the morning we were able to bear the constellation of architectural stars inside the Fort with some degree of complacency, occasionally bordering on the jocose. Thus, when the guide told us that the long crack in the black marble throne was caused when the Jàt usurper from Bhartpùr first sat there, we inquired the gentleman's weight. He went on to say that a reddish stain in one portion of the stone was blood.

'That's a lie,' said Potts; 'it's iron. You kin play off that sort of thing on me in old oak floors or linen dusters. I won't argy even about a bottle or a statty, but when it's stone, I'm acquent with the subjec'. You stand on me, stranger; that ain't blood; it's iron pyrites oxidised by bad weather.'

In the Golden Pavilion we saw the holes in the white marble wall, fourteen inches deep, into which the Mogul ladies, before retiring to rest, used to slip their jewels. These holes are so narrow that only a woman's slim hand can pass into them. Miss Potts at once essayed the task, plunged her hand into the recess, and withdrew it with a genuine shriek of terror. She had grasped a wriggling lizard!

Thus it ever is with Indian affairs. If you probe them deeply you will surely find exceeding nastiness. On the surface and all around us were marble halls and gilded palaces; beneath our feet were horrible dungeons, in whose foul recesses lived snakes and reptiles innumerable. If you are impressed by the idyllic simplicity of the lives of the natives, I pray you rest at that.

There is one legend, or mayhap it is all true, which redeems something of the sordidness of India, and that is the love of Shàh Jahàn for his beautiful wife. Not content with making her memorial a wonder of the world, he was true to her till death. When his last hours approached

he was carried to a pavilion in the palace overlooking the Tàj, and he gazed at its outlines until his spirit passed away.

That evening, at dinner, we encountered a curiosity. He was the most argumentative man I have ever met. When he could not flatly contradict you, he seized hold of any chance remark in order to show how little you really knew about the matter.

I happened to allude to the usefulness of the bamboo to the people of India, when he burst forth—

'Useful, sir! Useful is not the word; the bamboo is invaluable. They eat it, drink it, and smoke it; they build their houses, fashion their utensils, make their beds and mats from parts of the bamboo—in fact, sir, they use the bamboo for every conceivable purpose.'

Wishful to be agreeable, I replied—

'Yes. It is somewhat similar in its way to the walrus for the Laplander.'

'There is not the slightest similarity, sir. The bamboo is a giant grass, not a marine monster.'

I was mildly proceeding to explain that

the likeness referred to was merely in regard to general utility and not to genus, when a *khitmutgar*[1] came to my assistance by emptying the whole of a dish of chicken fricassee down the back of our choleric acquaintance's neck. We did not see him again during the meal.

'It is a frequent thing, after all,' said Dalrymple, 'for a precipitate *entrée* to be followed by a hurried exit.'

'It was a most effectual remove, anyhow,' hazarded Miss Potts.

When I ventured to observe that it was the only course left open to him, a great chill came over the table.

At last a Public Works' engineer sitting near us recovered from the effect of my gibe and said—

'You have had a narrow escape!'

'In what sense?' I inquired.

'That chap is compiling a dictionary of the economic products of the Indian Empire. From Bamboo he would have brought you to Cotton, from Cotton to Indigo, and thence by way of Opium and Tea to Yam, the word he is busy with just now.'

[1] Waiter.

'How awful!' cried Miss Potts. 'Can't he be locked up?'

'No. In fact he is doing the work for Government. But Nubbi Bux there has given us a wrinkle. We can always keep him quiet with a tin of stewed *murghi*.'[1]

Nevertheless, I resolved to be even with the dictionary-maker, who, some one said, had not been home since he first came to the country. Botany is a most resourceful science. What you do not know you can invent. So when I met him next morning on the verandah, I said with a bland smile—

'Can you tell me the name of this creeper?'

'Certainly. It is a Virginia. There are several other varieties in——'

'Yes, I know. On my father's house in Surrey there is a splendid specimen of the Orchidensis Brumjosefia.'

That staggered him.

'I have never heard of it,' he said. 'What sort of flower has it?'

'Grey, with pink tips. Very similar, indeed, to the Danlenolia Mariloidus, which, of course, you will remember,

[1] Fowl.

comes under the great class of Eccentrissima Varietis.'

He paled.

'Are they described in any standard work?' he inquired.

'Standard! Every botanical student in the Empire knows them!'

'Well, I don't. They sound to me a good deal like nonsense.'

'All right. I'm sorry you're so behind the times. When next you go to Kew on a Sunday afternoon you will hear every schoolboy talking about them.'

He was still suspicious.

'Can you remember who classified them?' he snapped.

'Yes. The late Professor Augustino Druriolanus.'

'Oh, a foreigner. As you mentioned Kew I thought that possibly Dyer might have discovered some new plants recently.'

'He has. Do you mean to say you haven't read about the Double-faria Gigans, commonly called the Victoria Prowler?'

'Is that a creeper?'

'It is the champion. You find it all over London.'

'Yes,' he said wearily, 'I am afraid I am rather antiquated, but for fourteen years I've been engaged in the Indian Forest Department. Would you mind jotting down those names for me? I will look them up.'

Needless to say we picnicked at Fatehpùr-Sikri, saw the Jumma[1] Musjid, went to the tomb of Itimad-ud-daulah—that quietly beautiful gem which has been really kept in repair—and generally did all those things that the good globe-trotter is supposed to do. I am afraid that this chapter savours somewhat of the guide-book. But what can one do when the pen glides off of its own accord into the outlines of domes and minarets, and there comes through the paper the gleam of white marble, silver, and rubies, and the sheen of shady arbours with roses studded in their recesses, and fountains plashing all around?

It is now my duty as a faithful chronicler to relate certain occurrences closely affecting the Potts family and Captain the Hon. Robert Dalrymple.

You may have imagined that during the past week or ten days the Hon. Bob

[1] Friday, a word frequently confounded with Jumna, the river.

had been making love to Miss Potts. He had done nothing of the sort. That he was greatly smitten by the girl there could not be the slightest possible manner of doubt, but he was bound by a code of honour which rendered fortune-hunting an abhorrent thing. An American heiress would be regarded a very big catch for a poor captain in the Guides.

So he was miserably happy. Every time he helped Miss Potts up an awkward staircase, or lifted her on or off her horse —we rode regularly in the early morning— an electrical thrill went through him which made him the life and soul of the company during the next hour. But frequently the truth of his position forced itself to the front, and then there was a hard, proud, almost contemptuous expression on his face, which was not nice.

The man was suffering the pangs of future misery. No, I have not concocted a bull. The scoundrel in the condemned cell feels himself hanged long before the executioner pays him his delicate attentions, and in most affairs of life we go through far more before than after the actual cause of trouble.

Dalrymple's case was a very serious one. Once, when he had that look on his face, an idiot of a commercial traveller, who had not noted the terms of intimacy on which our little party existed, sidled up to him and said—

'Do you know who the Yankee girl is? Isn't she a stunner!'

I expected to see murder. Dalrymple inquired icily, with strange self-control—

'To whom do you allude?'

The bagman looked in his eyes and hesitated. He was about to indicate Miss Potts more clearly. He looked again, and the words choked him. He managed to stutter out something about inquiring for a friend, whereupon Dalrymple resumed a desultory conversation with me.

The gallant captain was not of the softer human clay which, like the Indian chatty,[1] permits its tears to percolate to the outside. Still every heart insensibly aches for sympathy, so I was not surprised when, one evening, he asked me into his room, and over a peg[2] and a cigar poured out his soul,

[1] A clay water-bottle.

[2] A whisky and soda. The word is supposed to be condensed from the phrase: 'Another nail in your coffin.'

telling me all that I knew before, and winding up with the declaration that he would leave next day for Rawalpindi, as he could not stand it any longer. I tried to argue with him, and appealed to him at least to place the arbitrament of his fate in Miss Potts's hands. I added incautiously—

'It is not fair to the girl herself.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, suppose it should turn out that she reciprocates your affection?'

'There's not the slightest chance of it. When I hinted my intention to her at dinner to-night, she received the announcement with an indifference that certainly surprised me, even in the capacity of a year-old friend.' This somewhat savagely.

A thought struck me.

'Do you happen to remember at what period of dinner you made this interesting announcement?'

'Yes. We had just sat down. Why do you ask?'

Now, Miss Potts is a healthy girl, and her appetite had apparently not suffered much by her visits to India. I was particularly impressed that evening by the fact that, although every course was

brought to her, she hardly touched a morsel.

'The next time you want to discuss such matters,' I said, 'you might take some more fitting moment,' and I detailed the result of my observations.

It was of no avail. Dalrymple was unreasonably proud, and adhered to his fixed determination to end or begin his misery on the morrow by starting for the north.

No one rode next morning. I amused myself by strolling up and down the verandah of the hotel, examining the photographs, inlaid work, ancient arms and armour with which the enterprising merchants from the Agra bazaar are wont to tempt travellers' purses. I was bargaining for a handsome tulwar and a couple of kookries, the famous weapons of the Ghurkas, when there came to me an elderly man with the beard of a prophet and the eye of a hawk.

'Fortune tell it, sahib?' said he.

Then did a bright idea suggest itself to me.

'Come hither, wizard,' I murmured, leading him apart.

He was a very quick native. The average Hindu or Mohammedan is stupid enough. He will bungle the most simple directions in an extraordinary manner; but if you add a *soupçon* of intrigue or mystery, or better still, a shade of villainy, you will find the aborigine a marvel of intelligence.

So it came to pass that, after breakfast, I manœuvred Miss Potts, who was rather pale, into a seat on the verandah, and there came to her the elderly fraud aforesaid, who prayed the miss-sahib to have her fortune told. At another time she would have been delighted at the idea, but to-day she had no interest in anything.

However, as I supported the astrologer, she consented. He asked the date and year of her birth, made her throw some large brass dice, and touch a short cleft stick, after which he murmured an Arabic formula, consulted a truly imposing black-letter book bound in horn, and commenced—

'Sweet lady, you very rich — plenty crores rupees. Much happy, no sick, live long. Just now trouble—leetel trouble, go away quick. You love fine tall sahib — officer-sahib, and officer-sahib he love you. But he no tell; he poor man, you rich lady.

He say go, but no go; stay now, go small time, then come back always. You——'

'Shut up!' screamed Miss Potts, and she fled to her room.

I paid the fortune-teller and sauntered away in the belief that I had made an ass of myself. Now that my great scheme had come off I was utterly at a loss to see what good would result.

Tiffin was a dreary meal. Dalrymple still adhered to his intention to depart by the mail. About five o'clock Miss Potts took a book into a small tent which was pitched in the compound, ostensibly to read, but really, as I knew, to be alone.

Potts seemed to be vaguely conscious that something had gone wrong somewhere, and his loud-spoken denunciation of Dalrymple for deserting us when we were 'gettin' kinder real sociable' did not improve matters much. As for me, I was as miserable as Dalrymple himself, and when he came to ask me where Miss Potts was, I pointed to the tent, with the air of a Surrey-side tragedian and said—

'There!'

'Now,' thought I, 'comes the psychological moment.'

And I was right. The following details are pieced together from delicious little confidences afterwards intrusted to me.

Dalrymple approached the tent door, which was hidden from scrutiny from the hotel, and said—

'May I come in, Miss Potts?'

A very small 'Yes' gave the permission.

As he entered, she rose from her chair and tried to smile, but it was somewhat of a failure, and the corners of her mouth puckered up into a close resemblance to the stifling of a sob.

'I have come to say good-bye,' he explained politely, with a proper note of regret in his voice, which was marvellously under control. And all the while his hands clenched the back of the chair from which she had risen, as though he would squeeze the hard wood into pulp.

'Are you really gug-gug-going?'

In another few seconds she must either cry or faint.

'Yes,' he answered, 'my—er—my train goes in—er'—here he swallowed something—'in an hour.'

'And are you really leaving us'—the

plural was a delicate finesse—'because we are rich?'

'Who told you that?' he gasped.

'The—the—the man—the fortune-teller. He said you—I—oh, I don't know.'

Boo-hoo, boo-hoo! It was all over. The tears welled forth and suffused her lovely eyes and coursed down her cheeks. After that they followed a most erratic course. Instead of obeying the natural laws of gravitation, they never reached a lower level than the top of the Hon. Robert's waistcoat and some of them climbed to his moustache.

I only imagine these things, as all subsequent allusions stopped short at this point.

Ten minutes later Potts came to me, flopped into a chair by my side, mopped his face solemnly, and stared into space.

'Why, what on earth is the matter?' I cried.

'Matter!' he repeated—'matter! Look here, Wayne. Most times I kin see inter a twenty-foot rock, but the thinnest skin as ever covered a gal is harder to look through than the hull Sierra Nevada range.'

I knew what was coming, but I dissembled. He went on to explain—

'I don't mind tellin' you, Wayne. You're a friend of ours. Just now I asked the bearer where Dorothy was, and he said something about a dairy. I was goin' to punch his head for a stoopid, when he took me outside and showed me the tent.'

Here I whistled softly. Dehra is the Hindustani for tent.

'I walked over, and was jist goin' in, when blame me, if there wasn't Dalrymple a-huggin' my da'ater and callin' her his darlin' and pet, and talkin' all kinder foolishness, and she was a-croonin' away in his arms jist like her mother did when I axed her to be my wife in a little ranche down in Talaveras county nigh on thirty years ago.'

'Allow me to congratulate you on your daughter's choice,' I said, with a great gladness that those young people had put matters straight at last.

'Yes,' assented Potts. 'He's a fine fellow and she's a fine lass. I ain't any great shakes as a father-in-law, but they'll be a powerful fine couple. Only I didn't suspicion it at all.'

The next thing we heard was Dalrymple's bearer running madly about the compound shouting for his sahib, as all the boxes were on the gharry and there was only time to catch the train.

Dalrymple appeared, trying to look unconcerned, and calmly bade the man unpack everything; he wasn't going.

Towards the close of the following June, when I was grilling on the plains, there came to me a marked copy of the *Times* and a small box of wedding-cake. And this is what was blue-pencilled in the newspaper—

Dalrymple—Potts. At Christ Church, New York, on the 14th inst., by the Very Reverend the Dean, Captain the Honourable Robert Dalrymple, the Queen's Own Corps of Guides, second son of the Earl of Ilfracombe, to Dorothy, only daughter of Mr. Hiram T. Potts, formerly Brigadier-General U.S. Army, of Pottsville, Pa. Anglo-Indian papers please copy.

CHAPTER VI

HOW THE SIRDAR DACOITED A DACOIT

Considering the part I took in bringing those two together, it was very odd how the Sirdar Mohammed Khan and I became involved in the love-affairs of Charlie Bingham, the handsomest and hardest-up subaltern in the 17th Lancers.

The trouble all arose in the first instance through the known fondness of leopards for dining off puppy dogs.

A certain Mr. Septimus Browne, a millionaire ironmaster, convoyed his daughter Edith to India for the cold weather. Her health had suffered from the too close prospect of marriage with an elderly but distinguished member of the House of Lords. The doctor's orders were imperative, and Browne had no option but to take the girl for a long sea voyage and change of scene. Though he worshipped the ground she walked on, he gave her to

understand that when they returned in the spring there must be no more nonsense about the wedding.

Under these conditions, Edith Browne did not enjoy life as a sprightly young lady of her normal spirits and handsome exterior might reasonably be expected to do. Indeed, the first sign of animation she gave was during her visit to Simla, where two squadrons of my regiment supplied guards and escorts for the Viceroy, and my turn came to leave Meerut for the hills.

Charlie Bingham was an extra aide to the Commander-in-Chief. As the Brownes were at once taken into the viceregal set, he made himself agreeable to the fair Edith. Her father, to prevent mistakes, took good care to announce her engagement to the antiquated earl.

Bingham commenced by being civil; he ended by catching a bad attack of a common form of heart trouble, and the miserable part of the business was that neither honour nor expediency permitted him to declare his affection.

All this preamble, as the lawyers say, is necessary to a proper understanding of that which follows. One day a viceregal picnic

took place in a valley beyond Jutogh. By natural law, Bingham and the girl went a faster pace than their elders, and got well ahead of them. The lancer was gulping down his admiration whilst he talked of campaigning, and Edith was wondering how it was that eligible peers were never good-looking, when suddenly a half-grown leopard sprang from the concealment of a rock and tried to grab Edith's fox-terrier. The dog flinched, both ponies shied, Miss Browne fell off in a dead faint, Bingham cut savagely twice with his riding-whip at the astounded cub, who was just making a more certain spring at the puppy, his pony landed both heels with vigour and precision in the leopard's ribs, and the latter plunged into the jungle, hungry, but more than satisfied.

Charlie's kisses and the fox-terrier's licking soon restored Edith's senses. She was unhurt she declared, only terribly frightened. Then she and Bingham called each other 'darling' several times, and the kissing was not quite such a one-sided affair. Indeed the fox-terrier and the leopard were quite forgotten until Browne, his Excellency and others, alarmed by the

appearance of two riderless ponies, came on the scene.

When the story was told, every one said that it was very plucky of Charlie to tackle a leopard with a hunting-crop. Even Browne, who had seen more than he liked, was enthusiastic to a degree.

Once safely back at the hotel, however, he commenced to think more calmly and made up his mind to a course of action. He sent Bingham a cheque for £5000 with his compliments, and ordered a carriage at once to convey his daughter and himself to Umballa, then the nearest railway station to Simla.

The lancer received the cheque and knew what it meant. He took it back, and found the Brownes just starting, the father and daughter ensconced in a phaeton, and their luggage and servants piled into three tongas.

Miss Browne was nursing her fox-terrier and crying; the ironmaster was as rigid as a pig of his own best marketable brand, and Charlie had to bite his lips hard before he spoke.

Edith's presence made things awkward. So he simply said—

'Good-bye, Mr. Browne. I am sorry you are leaving so soon. Good-bye, Miss Browne, our little adventure will cause you to remember Simla.'

Then he turned on his heel, and round the next corner lit a cheroot with the cheque. The operation took some time, as he fumbled over striking the match. The fact is, there were tears in his eyes.

The Brownes drove off amidst a crowd of salaaming natives, and the father said to himself—

'Somehow, I thought that chap would have returned the cheque. I am very glad he did not.'

And the girl sobbed quietly, for she knew that Bingham loved her.

The following afternoon I was sitting in my room at the club, hesitating between some long deferred calls and a ride round Jakko, when Charlie Bingham, haggard and wild-eyed, burst the door open with his foot and rushed in. He was carrying a fox-terrier in his arms. The little animal was whimpering with pain and its white hairs were soiled with clotted blood and dust.

'What's the matter?' I cried, astounded by the manner of his entrance no less than

by his appearance. 'Has some one ridden over your dog?'

'It is not my dog,' he answered hoarsely. 'It is Edith's—Miss Browne's.'

Now, in Simla, people always know everybody else's business; the events already narrated were practically public property.

'How did he come back?' was my next question.

'I cannot tell. I want you to help me. You know a lot about these infernal natives. Look here!'

He tenderly turned the moaning terrier so that I could see an unmistakable sword cut which had traversed the dog's loins, and was evidently meant to cut him in two.

'But where did you find him?'

'I went for a stroll along the Keri Ghat road (the road which commands a view of the plains) when I met this little chap limping along up the hill. I knew him at once. Something must have happened, something terrible, or he would never have been parted from his mistress, and in this state. Help me, old chap, or I shall go mad.'

Before I could frame any reply a knock at the door caused me to open it and see who was disturbing us.

The Sirdar stood without. He would have given me some details of duty, but I dragged him into the room and hastily explained to him all that I knew myself concerning the departure of the Brownes and the finding of the wounded terrier.

His eyes grew fierce as he listened.

'It is an evil thing, sahib,' he said.

'Why do you think so?'

'Because Chumru, the dacoit, lost his two brothers in a fight with the police at Kalka a month past, and the talk in the bazaar is that he will have vengeance on the *sahib-log*, even if he has to attack the Lord-Sahib[1] himself. This is his work.'

'But what can we do? The whole party has probably been murdered long since.'

At this question even the astute Mohammedan was silent. Bingham, who did not understand Urdu, begged me to translate.

His eloquence made me act foolishly. Instead of leaving the affair to the proper authorities, I handed over my routine duties to the next in command, and within twenty

[1] Viceroy.

minutes the three of us were going down the hill towards the Keri Ghat at a fast canter.

Fifteen miles down a precipitous road supply ample occupation for an hour, even when the cattle are good.

At the stage-house we learned that the Brownes had passed at the expected time the previous evening, but news was to hand that the phaeton and tongas and their occupants had not arrived at Solon, the next stage, and a search was even then being made for them. The slow-witted babus in charge of the tonga service had come to the conclusion that twenty odd hours were more than sufficient for the performance of the intervening fourteen miles.

Perhaps the party had fallen over the Khud.[1] When Mohammed Khan pointed out that four vehicles would hardly follow one after the other over the side of the precipice, the tonga master referred him to the mysterious ways of Allah.

'When did you cause a search to be made?' said the Sirdar, with growing sternness in his voice.

[1] The precipitous side of a mountain road.

'When the tongas were missed, protector of the poor.'

'At what hour?'

'When it had struck three in the afternoon, your honour.'

Mohammed Khan dismounted, seized the man by the neck, and shook him violently.

'Listen, dog. Chumru, the dacoit, has done this thing, and thou knowest it. Speak; tell me all, else will I silence thee for ever!'

At the mention of Chumru's name the dark-skinned native bleached with terror.

'I will speak that which I know,' he gurgled. 'Chumru fell upon the party when they were passing through the wood two miles from here. He made the drivers turn off into the jungle; then he and his followers slew all save the sahib and the miss-sahib. I found the bodies at dawn; but I dared not cry out in the village lest Chumru should hear of it, and I should meet my death.'

'How many did Chumru's band number?'

'I know not, Huzoor, but they were at least a score. Such is the talk of those who have seen them.'

The Sirdar flung the man off, satisfied

that he had told all he knew. Bingham's bloodshot eyes sought mine, and I thought it best to tell him what we had learned.

He would have ridden on at once, but I pointed out the folly of such a proceeding. Night was approaching. Chumru and his captives must be many miles away in the interior by this time, and, as this famous dacoit and his associated cut-throats were known to be well armed with modern weapons, the only chance of succour lay in organised pursuit by the military police.

I did not add that, in my opinion, the case was hopeless.

The Sirdar agreed with me that our best course was to ride on to Solon and inform the authorities, whilst we must be content to accompany the armed force that would set out at dawn.

When our horses were breathed we started again at a quieter pace. As luck would have it, we reached the scene of the outrage just as the rapid advance of the Indian night was plunging all things in gloom.

The road was level here, and on both sides were patches of turf. Bingham reined in his charger for a little while, and out of

sympathy, we did the same. Suddenly the Sirdar, whose quick eyes were ever on the alert, noted something unusual on the road-side. He jumped from the saddle and grappled with the object, which proved to be a man lying at full length on the turf, where he had flung himself face downwards, with the object, seemingly, of escaping our notice as we rode by in the darkness.

He whined some explanation of his presence, but when I struck a match, and we caught a glimpse of his evil face, Mohammed Khan cried—

'By the beard of the Prophet, 'tis one of Chumru's thieves!'

It was a mere guess, but a lucky one. The fellow thought we were police-officers, and he cried out that if we would spare him he would tell us everything.

The story was of the common order which is too familiar in those parts of India infested with gangs of dacoits. Once the hapless travellers were safely removed from the high-road, Chumru and his followers had ruthlessly slain the drivers and servants before despoiling them of any little articles of value they possessed. The baggage was then ransacked, the phaeton and tongas

thrown into a nullah, and the ponies served to convey Mr. Browne and his daughter, together with the plunder.

'How many go with Chumru?' asked the Sirdar.

'Thirteen, not counting your honour's slave.'

'And how came you here?'

'I carry a chit from the old sahib to a sahib in Simla.'

'A chit! Where is it?'

The man produced a piece of soiled paper, which was rolled up and inscribed 'C. Bingham, Esq., 17th Lancers.'

Astounded at the turn taken by events, I lit match after match whilst Bingham deciphered the following note, written with a trembling hand in lead pencil—

'Dear Sir,—My daughter and I have fallen into the clutches of a number of robbers who have murdered our servants and treated us with every indignity. Their leader, however, gives me to understand, so well as I can follow his few broken words of English, that if you hand the bearer two thousand gold mohurs he will place Edith and myself within easy distance of the main

road, where we can find help. There must be no pursuit nor any attempt at rescue, as he will kill us the moment there is any alarm. He will not allow me to write to a banker or official, but only to some friend who will give the money required and maintain silence with the authorities. I have little faith in him, but, if I escape, I will more than repay you, Mr. Bingham. For God's sake save my girl. My own fate matters little, as it can be but death. For her I fear more, SEPTIMUS BROWNE.'

Charlie jerked out the last sentence with a great gulp, and when I told the Sirdar the contents of the note he said—

'There is no use waiting for the money, sahib. Chumru is using a trick to get the gold. He will become impatient and kill Browne-sahib long before the messenger arrives.'

'And the miss-sahib?'

'She will kill herself. Your women-kind think differently to ours.'

I was glad Bingham did not understand him, else we should have had a maniac on our hands, but I could have beaten

my head against a wall in sheer rage at our impotence.

Mohammed Khan was more matter-of-fact.

'Listen, thief!' he said, hissing the words into the face of the wretch whom he held in his powerful grasp. 'Dost want to die this moment?'

The man would have uttered a prayer for mercy, but the rissaldar-major heeded him not.

'If thou liest,' he growled, 'I will tear thy tongue out and throw it to the crows. Where does Chumru await thee?'

'He will await me at another place, but he sleeps to-night in safety not ten miles away.'

'Ha, say'st thou? What manner of safety?'

''Tis a gully in the hills known but to few. I can lead you thither, yet what can three do against so many?'

'Do they keep watch, then?'

'No, Huzoor, there is no need for watch. No man could find it who knew not where to go and how to get there.'

''Tis better so. Lead us. Thy life

will be spared if thou keepest trust. Fail not, or to-morrow's sun will show thy body to the kites.'

Only the terror of evildoers inspired by the native police can explain the willing treachery of our strangely-met guide. He believed his comrades already lost, and hoped to save his own miserable skin.

Fortunately for our quest the moon rose. Our horses, accustomed to journeys in the hills, scrambled through the rough defiles that led away towards the inner Himalayan range, where the Sutlej river pierces through the mountains from Upper Thibet.

As we struggled, ever upwards, by valley, hillside, and rock-strewn woodland, I marvelled at the wild sequence of events which had drawn me, in a few hours, from the civilisation of Simla into the fierce barbarism of the East. Our mission was fantastic as any recorded by Arab chronicler. Plan we had none, to my knowledge, whilst probability pointed to the three of us giving our lives in a vain attempt at rescue.

Bingham rode on in a state of quiet frenzy, but the Sirdar kept his prisoner

taut at the end of a heel-rope, fastened to neck and wrists, with a calm certainty of getting the best of Chumru that shamed me into silence when I would have questioned the outcome of our expedition. For arms, Bingham and I each had a couple of revolvers, and the Sirdar carried his inseparable sabre and a sheath-knife.

After nearly three hours of plodding march we reached a wooded valley, wide, precipitous, and sombre, with a torrent dashing noisily through a tree-hidden channel, and snow-capped peaks glinting in the moonbeams beyond its confines.

Pointing to the eastern hillside, our captive explained that within a hundred yards of the crest there was a hollow which would shelter a regiment, but it was so effectually screened by the trees that it could never be noted from any point of view. The approach was steep, though practicable for hill ponies, and within its shelter the dacoit and his gang with their captives were resting until dawn.

He had barely finished his recital, when Mohammed Khan, without the slightest warning, fell upon him, gagged him, and trussed him like a fowl for the spit.

'Thou canst not betray twice,' he muttered. 'If thy tale be false, we kill thee on our return.'

The man indicated by his rolling, terror-stricken eyes that he had not misinformed us, and I believed him, but the Sirdar's precautions were nevertheless soldier-like.

'And now?' I said.

'Let us attack them,' said Bingham.

'Let us look first and fight afterwards,' said the cool-headed native.

We tethered our horses and commenced to climb. Once I held Bingham, who would have vainly spent his breath, and once I nearly shouted aloud, for a rock-snake wrapped his coils round my leg and it needed all my resolution to crush him quietly with the disengaged foot.

We had not understood from our guide's *patois* that the dacoit's hiding-place was a glade, denuded of trees, and we should have blundered into the moonlit space were we not warned by a slight descent that we were close to it.

Sure enough, there were eight ponies grazing within a few yards of us. On the further side, close to the wood, were a number of recumbent figures round the

embers of a fire, and in the shade we could see Browne and his daughter lying on the roots of two trees, to which, presumably, they were tied.

It was a close thing. Edith's involuntary shriek of terror when some one bent over her with a glittering knife in his hand brought half a dozen robbers to their feet. Four of them fell at once.

The survivors, thinking that they were attacked in force, ran off at top speed. Indeed, I thought the fray over, when one of the wounded men, recovering from the first shock of a bullet through his thigh, rose to his knees, seized a rifle, and aimed deliberately at Edith Browne. There could be no manner of doubt concerning his motive.

Vengeful as an infuriated tiger, he possessed the more terrible attribute of debased humanity, and sought to inflict the greatest injury on his assailants by murdering her whom they came to succour.

We all saw him. I fired, but, in my anxiety, missed. Bingham, too, made an ineffectual effort to stop him, and at the same moment jumped in front of the girl,

who had risen, and was gazing with wildly dilated eyes at her would-be slayer.

Chumru pressed the trigger as Charlie made his spring, and the latter spun round and fell. But the famous dacoit's severed head reached the ground first, for the Sirdar came within striking distance ere the rifle left his shoulder.

Edith had long since recognised her lover, and when she saw him tumble as one dead I expected her to scream, or faint, or burst into tears.

Had I guessed for the rest of my life, I should never have approached within measurable distance of her real actions.

She knelt down and looked into Bingham's insensible face. Then she rose, walked to the place where her father, who had witnessed the whole incident, was lying struggling hopelessly with the ropes that bound him. Bending down, and gazing steadily at him, she said—

'If he is dead, it is you who have killed him, and I shall never own you again. He has given his life for me, and I am his, his only, for ever.'

Her voice was clear and sharp as the

clink of ice in a glass. From that moment the hard ironmaster and his daughter exchanged characters. The girl ruled, and I verily believe he liked it.

Meanwhile the Sirdar was the only strategist in the field. To hurry up the retreat he turned the enemy's ordnance upon them. One of the flying gang pitched headlong into the grass and remained there, whilst a yell from another as he plunged into the forest showed that his flight had been momentarily accelerated.

All danger of renewed attack had now passed. Bingham's head was pillowed on Edith's lap, and I suppose there was some electrical influence in her touch, for, to my amazement, he opened his eyes and murmured, with the ghost of a smile—

'It's all right! Only my collar-bone. Beastly nuisance!'

Then Edith began to cry.

With some difficulty we lifted him on to one of the ponies, and regained our horses. The rest of the story is orthodox. Charlie and the fox-terrier were convalescent together, both being sedulously nursed by Edith; Browne was very proud of his prospective son-in-law; the Sirdar drew,

among other sums, the big reward placed by Government on Chumru's head; and I —I received a gentle wigging from the chief for being absent without leave for forty-eight hours.

CHAPTER VII

HOW WE FED CROCODILES ON THE INDUS

When we quitted Simla for Lahore, Mohammed Khan and I were kept busy with regimental duties for some months. The frivolities of station life had little charm for me. A smart cavalry regiment provides sufficient exercise for its officers during the drill season, so my unoccupied hours after dinner seldom found me in other society than my books and my violin.

Lahore is one of the tombs of Mussulman rule in India, and the splendour of its ruins, after two centuries of decay, is ample testimony of the glories that surrounded the lives of Akbar the Great and his son, Jehangir.

One evening in January I was poring over a poetic chronicle of those bygone days, and the sonorous Persian tempted me to read it aloud—

'The King of Kings always kept 12,000 horses and 5000 elephants in his stable, apart from those used for hawking, hunting and war. On the great festival of Nau Roz, the Emperor, surrounded by princes and nobles, sat on the royal throne, attired in rich garments, adorned with diamonds, rubies and emeralds, and a crown bearing high heron plumes. Many hundreds of elephants, all sumptuously clothed, passed before him in procession, the leading elephant of each company wearing large gold plates on its head and breast. Trains of gorgeously caparisoned horses followed, after which came, in succession, rhinoceroses, lions, tigers, panthers, hunting leopards, hounds and hawks, the display terminating with a vast host of cavalry resplendent in a cloth of gold. *Allah ho Akbar*!'[1]

As the words left my lips I was positively startled to hear the familiar reply ring out behind me—

'*Jalli jala-lahu*!'[2]

The voice told me who was the intruder, and I turned with a smile—

[1] 'God is great!'

[2] 'May his brightness shine forth!'

'Those were fine times, Mohammed Khan.'

'But they have passed, sahib. Never again will there be such loot after a battle.'

I laughed at his comment: the Sirdar thought my mirth was sympathetic.

'Ah, sahib,' he continued, 'one wonders where all the riches have gone. My father told me that the old men in the bazaar of this city were wont to speak of that which took place long before they were born. Four hundred pairs of scales are said to have been at work, weighing gold and jewels, and the total could not be made in five months. Eight large vaults were filled with coins and precious stones, and the crown of Akbar itself was worth many crores of rupees. These things are still on earth, but where?'

The old man's doleful voice suggested one mourning over a lost hoard. Yet I dared not chaff him. Ridicule, even from a friend, found his only vulnerable point.

He had come for a gossip, so I invited him to sit down.

'Does tradition say aught of the disposal of all this wealth, Sirdar?'

'Well, sahib, there is a tale, but it is not clear to my mind. It is said that when the father of Nur Mahàl, the Light of the Palace, came to India, he was very poor. The little girl was born in the Persian desert, and the exceeding poverty of her parents led them to leave her, when still very young, at the foot of a tree on the banks of the Indus. The mother fainted when a turn in the road hid the infant from her view, whereupon the father went back and saw a large crocodile making for the child. He killed the reptile, but was set upon by a Hindu fakir, who tended the crocodile as a river god. So the father killed the fakir, too, and rescued his little one, who became the great queen of Jehangir, whilst the father was the Lord High Treasurer, Itimad-ud Daula.'

''Tis a likely story,' I said, as Mohammed Khan had paused, 'but how about the treasure?'

'A man speaks history as he remembers it, sahib,' was his gentle remonstrance. 'Nur Mahal was regarded in the north Punjab as the treasure of the Indus, and the legend is that in time the Indus got

back its lost one, together with much of the wealth that Akbar left to her husband. But the thing is misty in my brain. I cannot put it together as I heard it in my youth.'

Somehow the yarn interested me.

'It seems to me,' I said, 'that the clue is missing which connects the baby, the crocodile, and the fakir with the future empress. Perhaps the time will come when it will be made plain.'

'If it be God's will,' said Mohammed Khan. And with this invincible summing up we left the question, especially as an unlooked-for interruption came at the moment.

A servant entered with a note from the colonel.

'My dear Wayne,' it ran, 'I have just received orders to place you and Mohammed Khan at the service of the Government of India on special duty for three months. Now, I am somewhat tired of losing my junior captain and my chief native officer six months out of every year, even if you *do* come back with some devilish interesting adventures to relate. So make a failure of this business, what-

ever it may be, old chap, and then you will remain here in peace.'

Behold us, therefore, three days later, seated in earnest conclave with the District Superintendent of Police in his bungalow near the fort at Attock.

The matter in which we were ordered to assist him was mysteriously horrible. Each year, a European girl-child disappeared for ever from some portion of the Attock district. The incident invariably happened early in March. Since the garrisons on the frontier were increased in numbers, with the resultant settlement of several families in the Attock camp, the child had been taken from the town itself.

Two years in succession had a little one been spirited away from the very gates of the fort, leaving her maddened parents not the slightest sign of her fate. Inquiries instituted by the authorities quickly revealed that at the same period in every year of which there was record some family had lost an infant daughter, either in Attock itself, or in Peshawur or Rawalpindi — any neighbouring station where there happened to be English households.

On two definite occasions, frontier troubles and the varying chances of regimental life had taken nearly every English child to other districts, and in these years the infants of Kashmiri women were stolen.

The closest investigation had revealed nothing further, but now that the fatal time was approaching, every English mother who possessed a small girl amidst her treasures was wild with apprehension. How could we discover the origin of the terror, and put an end to its fiendish agents?

This was the problem set to me by the policeman, and he eagerly followed my words as I translated it for the benefit of Mohammed Khan.

'This evil is wrought at the time of the Nau Roz, sahib?' he said, at the end of my recital. The festival of Nau Roz, literally new days, or spring-time, falls about the time of the vernal equinox.

'It is so.'

'And the children are always white girls?'

'Yes.' The cream-complexioned Kashmiri women often deserve their poetic Persian appellation 'moon-faced.'

'Then the two incidents are closely

related, sahib — the spring-tide feast and the theft of a white girl-baby.'

Further speculation was futile at the moment.

Soon afterwards we quitted the D.S.P.[1] and resumed our favourite rôles, I as a globe-trotter occupying rooms at the *dâk* bungalow,[2] the Sirdar trading in skins and rugs in the bazaar.

If there is one trait more than another which I have derived from my close association with Mohammed Khan, it is a rooted distrust of the Hindu religious medicant.

Next morning I was surprised to see two of these wretched specimens of humanity seated by the roadside opposite my room. One, the elder and more forbiddingly sacred of the pair, had, by way of penance, held his left arm aloft over his head during so many years that muscles and flesh had withered away, leaving only a rigid and paralysed limb of bone and shrivelled skin, whilst the nails of his clenched fist had passed right through the palm and curled in spirals round the back of the hand before they ceased growing.

[1] District Superintendent of Police.

[2] Government rest-house.

His companion fakir was qualifying for equal holiness. His naked shoulders and loins were scarred with the marks of hook-swinging, and the cartilage of his nose was dragged below the level of his mouth by the weight of a huge silver ring the size of a small quoit.

Truly, a pretty pair, fanatics whose zeal enabled them stolidly to bear torture from which the bravest might flinch, disciples of a faith of gloom and horror, priests of a religion unrelieved by hope, wherein the greatest reward is to enter into nothingness.

I could admire the steadfastness of these scoundrels in their vague beliefs did I not loathe their lives of treachery, deceit, extortion and even worse crimes. The record of the fakir class embrace all that is most vile in the criminology of India.

As I watched them, the wife of an engineer in the Public Works Department, a stranger in Attock, and like myself, staying at the *dâk* bungalow, quitted the verandah to go for a stroll with her little girl and her ayah.

The pretty child was pallid as a white rose, with hair and eyebrows dark as those

of her mother, a true Celt thus far from the Cornish cliffs. Her inquisitive eyes were naturally caught by the weird objects on the side of the road, and I fancied that the fakirs exchanged a glance of baleful import as the trio passed them.

Suddenly a fanciful notion possessed me, and I acted on the impulse to scrutinise the two worthies more closely. Donning a white coat and an absurd *sola topi*, made by a London tailor (he had put a frill around it in place of a *puggri*), I strode forth whistling loudly, and at once approached the fakirs.

They scowled at me but I paid no heed. Throwing them some two-anna bits, I said in English—

'Well, you are a pair of beauties and no mistake.'

They gathered up the silver scornfully and uttered no word.

'Doesn't this hurt you?' I cried, touching the end of the younger man's nose-ring with my stick.

My assumed ignorance alone palliated such an insult to one of his kidney. Starting as though a snake had bitten him, he fumbled with his hand to draw a knife from

his loin cloth, calling me a fool and a dog the while.

But the other restrained him, saying—

'Peace, brother. Be not wrathful with this mad wanderer. He comes from over the black water, and he will return ere the sun can touch him.'

'May all his accursed brood go with him,' growled he with the bull-ring.

'They will. Believe and worship, for the river-god cometh, and mayhap our long vigil will be rewarded.'

They little knew that the seeming globe-trotter had devoted many a brain-racked hour to the study of the gibberish of mixed Pushtu and Hindi in which they conversed. My only difficulty was to control my eyes lest they should reveal my secret.

Not another word would either man utter, so I resumed my walk, whistling an air from *The Geisha*, just then becoming popular.

Once beyond their ken I quickened my pace to the police officer's bungalow. I met him riding towards the town.

'Anything fresh?' he said quizzically, for the exploits of Mohammed Khan and

myself generally evoked credence only when they were ended.

'No. But I want to ask you if crocodiles inhabit this reach of the Indus?'

He reflected a moment before he replied—

'They do, in a measure. When the river is in flood during the rains or when the snow melts on the hills the torrent here is too strong for them and they go off to the shallows near Dera Ghazi Khan or Mithun Kote. But, in the cold weather, and right up to the end of April, you will often see them on the rocks at the base of the cliffs between which the river runs. A favourite spot is the more open site of the confluence of the Indus and the Kabul river, a mile up-stream.'

'This town was famous in the old days as the first halting-place of every invader who entered or left India by the north,' I went on.

'I believe so; but are you trying to pull my leg? What has the history and natural history of Attock got to do with this affair?'

I fenced with him.

'Surely,' I laughed, 'my questions are

correct enough for my character as an observant tourist.'

'Well, yes. But I am in a hurry. It is more important for me to keep a close watch on every *budmash*[1] in the bazaar.'

He rode off, nettled and puzzled.

My rendezvous with Mohammed Khan was at the Old Serai, now an artillery mess.

'Sirdar,' I said when we met, 'do you remember aught of a tale concerning a baby, a crocodile, and a fakir—a baby who afterwards became a queen?'

'Surely, sahib. 'Twas when we talked of Nur Mahàl—and—and—the treasure of the Indus.'

'I think we have a part, at least, of the missing clue'; and I told him what little I had learnt that morning.

But to the rissaldar-major it meant much. His quick intelligence travelled fast along the devious paths of Eastern thought. To him nothing was too far-fetched or inhuman in method to commend itself as a possible key to the solution of a mystery in which a fakir might be the prime-mover.

'There is light where there was darkness,' he said sententiously when I had

[1] Thief or vagabond.

ended my recital. 'Can we, by any chance, sahib, find out if all the lost children were dark-haired as well as fair-skinned?'

The question was well conceived. Probably it had a foundation in fact, but the police superintendent could only help us in the instance of the previous year. Here the description was accurate.

Our informant perceived that we had some definite idea in mind. He was still sceptical, and as my surmise savoured of a romance, weirdly horrible and grotesque, I did not enlighten him further.

At my request, however, the engineer's child at the *dâk* bungalow was unobtrusively guarded. Nevertheless it was well that I had little faith in the watch maintained by a Punjabi policeman.

The Sirdar managed to pick up some scraps of gossip in the Attock bazaar and the neighbouring village of Mullahai-Tolah. Locally the crocodile was held sacred, but it was only the holiest among the Hindus who knew why. The feast of the Magar god coincided too with the Mohammedan celebration of the Nau Roz, due nine days hence. Finally a little creek on the left bank of the Indus, fifty yards below its

junction with the famous stream that flows through the Khaibar Pass, was so infested with the suarians at this time of the year that no one ventured to go there except, of course, Private Thomas Atkins, when he happened to be in the locality and wanted to 'pot a mugger.'

Mohammed Khan and I decided to visit that creek at once.

The place looked forbidding enough even at the initial glimpse. For no assignable reason, save perhaps a geological fault in the rocky chasm through which the turbulent river had forced its way, a deep cleft severed the left bank to the water's edge, vanishing at the natural level some hundred and fifty yards back. The descent was steep and difficult, over jagged rocks and loose stones for a distance, then between rounder and moss-covered boulders, for in flood-time the river here rises ninety feet and more.

At this season the water was low. On a spit of sand far beneath we could distinguish the slimy snouts and ugly square heads of several large crocodiles basking in the afternoon sun. Somehow, the mere sight of the giant reptiles sent a cold

shudder down my back. Ever since that eventful episode in my life I have never seen one but I have felt a fiendish delight in shooting him if possible.

We were determined to explore the creek thoroughly, however, and leave nothing to surmise, so we clambered down until we reached a large rock some fifty feet above the river's level. Here the Sirdar's close scrutiny detected some scratches near the base of the rock, showing clearly in the deep green evenness of the mossy growth. They suggested, at least, the passage of some creature, man or brute, by this strange pathway, and eagerly we looked for further signs to guide us. Soon we found them leading away to the left towards the face of the sheer cliff.

Cautiously following the trail, difficult enough for our slippery boots, we came at last in full view of the stream, though yet high above it. Rounding another large boulder, and creeping under an arm of rock that seemed to bar our way threateningly, we suddenly hit upon a comparatively easy descent leading to a cavern. This turned abruptly to the left, but the dim light from its depths

showed that it was a tunnel rather than a cave.

We were both now thoroughly excited. Beads of perspiration, due as much to hysterical expectancy as to physical exertion on my part, trembled on my forehead, and Mohammed Khan's eyes glowed like blood-red rubies. Why, I know not, but we were convinced that we were on the verge of some astounding discovery.

When we stood beneath the arch of rock and saw that it ran steeply down to the splashing waters of the Indus, we were disappointed at first. Had we borne this mental strain for nothing—merely to look at a passage hewn by nature in some unaccountable freak? It was disheartening. There was but a half light in the place, for it ran almost parallel with the cliff, and was wholly screened from observation, from either bank or river.

Suddenly the Sirdar clutched my arm.

'*Ohé*, sahib,' he hissed, '*bahut bara magar hai!*'

There certainly was the largest and most evil-looking crocodile that ever I have seen, down there in the shallow water.

He was apparently eighteen feet in length, and his long and loathsome body seemed to sway gently in the eddy formed by the current. His slime-covered scales glistened in the green sheen of the water, whilst his cruel jaws and powerful claws rested on a sloping rock—the quiet undulation of his sweeping tail giving the momentary impression that he was about to spring straight out at us.

These reptiles invariably slink noiselessly into deep water at sight or sound of a man when they cannot attack him, but this one belied his species; he did not budge. If anything, he wriggled more closely to the foot of the cavernous stairway, and his wicked little eyes peered up at us with that unrelenting hatred of a human being revealed by the spiteful glint of a cobra's tiny orbs or the glare of an infuriated tiger.

I was half inclined to fire at him with my revolver, were it not useless.

Mohammed Khan was not a good subject for lively emotion. He soon attended to the practical side of things.

'Sahib,' he said after a close scrutiny of the rocks, 'those thieves feed the *magar*

with goats and sheep. There is the hair of both animals on the stones.'

I well knew the 'thieves' he alluded to, for three small dabs of red paint near the entrance showed that we were standing in a shrine—the habitat of the river-god, whose ugly prototype lay waiting for his dole within a few feet of us. The mere fact that the ghastly object did not move from our presence proved that he was accustomed to being fed by man.

Assured that in ferreting out this resort we had materially advanced our inquiry, we quitted the place and breathed freely again when we reached the top of the cliff.

Thenceforth, day and night, we watched the creek in turn. Soon we learned that each evening, shortly after dark, a fakir brought a small living goat or lamb to the cavern, and presumably threw it to the waiting crocodile, as he always returned without it.

Five men, one of whom was the younger of the pair I had noted, performed this task on different occasions, and we did not interfere with them, their so-called religious rite harming none but the unfortunate animals they chose for the sacrifice.

Ultimately the festival of Nau Roz came and passed. The police superintendent was jubilant. No child had disappeared, and the fateful date had gone by. Clearly, there was nothing in the affair after all. The previous thefts of little girls were merely coincident with the feast, and the child-stealers had either quitted the district or been frightened by his precautions. He laughed at the notion of high governmental authorities solemnly bringing my native comrade and myself from Lahore on such a wild-goose chase—it was quite typical of the clever officials who filled easy berths in the secretariat. Now, practical men like himself—

I listened, but my answering laugh was hollow. Would he have laughed, I wondered, had he known of that fearful monster waiting and watching at the foot of the tunnel? Moreover, the Nau Roz was a Mohammedan fixture; the full moon, a more notable epoch to a Hindu, was due the following night.

Mohammed Khan and I agreed to watch the gully in company on the evening after my conversation with the D.S.P. If nothing happened, I resolved to report to

Government, and undertake a crocodile hunt on my own account.

I was having tea in the artillery mess when the furious gallop of a pony, hard ridden, caught my ear as it came up the hill from the church and clattered through the gateway. I went out to learn who travelled in such haste, and was in time to see the police superintendent fling himself from the saddle.

He ran towards me, with a haggard, desperate look in his face.

'This is a terrible business, Wayne,' he cried.

'What has happened?'

'That lady staying at the *dâk* bungalow has lost her child. No one has seen the little one since soon after luncheon. Some idiot has told the mother about the other children, and she is rushing about like a maniac.'

It was time to act, and promptly.

'Your men must know the haunts of every fakir in the two bazaars. Have them thoroughly searched at once. Meanwhile, let some one assure the mother that she shall have her daughter safe in her arms to-night.'

My confidence calmed him, poor chap, and he went off as quickly as he had arrived. There can be no doubt that sanctity was no safeguard for a Hindu fanatic in Attock during the next hour.

The Sirdar soon came in answer to my urgent summons. This time we abandoned our usual station among a tope of trees on the cliff, and made our way straight to the cave. The huge crocodile still patiently waited at his post, and in the creek itself were a dozen of his fellows.

The great rock near the turn in the path gave us ample shelter in the deepening gloom. Before we crouched behind it Mohammed Khan drew his inseparable sabre from the loose folds of his merchant's garb. He had cunningly hidden the blade, slinging it from his shoulder diagonally across his back. Though we had not long to wait, the minutes passed slowly, the deep silence of the night being broken only by the occasional heavy snorts of the floundering reptiles beneath.

At last, the displacement of a stone above warned us that some one approached. Against the sky-line we could discern several figures of men. They made their

way downwards slowly and with difficulty. When they came nearer we saw that the four were helping a fifth, the aged fakir with the withered arm, and there was no child with them.

They passed so close to us that I could have touched each in turn. When they gained the cave they squatted panting around its mouth.

The old fakir gasped for breath. Unusual exertion and superstitious anticipation combined to render his words indistinct. But he clearly wished to say something, and the intense mental force of the man at last enabled him, with much effort, to speak coherently.

'Brothers,' he said, 'the hour approacheth. May the river-god be propitious to his faithful servants! Many men have lived and died since Sri-Magar lost the maiden delivered to him by the stranger who worshipped fire. Long has he waited for her return, and well have our fathers served him.

'Here in this stream lies the vast treasure of gold and gems which he took in revenge from the army of the usurper. He made it known to the Saint Bisnàth,

that when the fair-faced and dark-haired girl is re-born on the banks of the Indus, he will reveal to the worshipper who restores her to him the place where the treasure is hidden by the rushing waters.

'His words are true—they fail not, though men pass away. Long have we proffered the sacrifice on the night of the full moon after Nau Roz, but in vain. Some day she will be here, and we shall find her. Perhaps to-night, my brothers, the maiden may be the re-incarnation of Nur Mahàl, the white-faced woman who defiled the temple of Vishnu. We shall see, we shall see. Look, brothers, Sri-Magar awaits his reward. Give worship unto the river-god, so that he may be appeased and be gracious to his servants.'

The moon's radiance now flooded rocks and stream with glorious light, lending a touch of romance to the weird orgies we witnessed so strangely. The wretches at the mouth of the cave peered down at the dreadful brute we knew to be lurking at the bottom, and it needed all my self-restraint to keep from attacking them.

Mohammed Khan would have slain them

like vermin, but I perforce withheld him; as yet we had no specific crime for which to call them to account.

But whilst we watched and listened there came a sound, slight in itself, that smote our ears in the silence like a clap of thunder—the cry of a child in terror, faint and muffled it seemed, yet close to us, followed by the cautious shuffling of feet over the rocks to the right.

The five fakirs heard it too. They turned our way, and I saw the eyes of one of them glisten in the moonlight with the green phosphorescence of a cat. My blood tingled with expectation, and I felt the muscles of Mohammed Khan's arm tighten like whipcord as his hand closed on the hilt of his sabre.

Suddenly the figure of the nose-ringed fakir came into full view. The naked, dust-covered scoundrel was carrying in his arms a little bundle wrapped in a shawl, and even as he stepped within a yard of the rock behind which I crouched, there came from its folds another childish wail.

I could wait no longer.

Thrusting a revolver into a pocket in order to have both hands at liberty, I

sprang out and clutched the little one from him. In the same instant, moved by some instinct of latent savagery, I plucked his nose-ring out with a vicious tug, and his roar of mingled pain and amazement lasted while he pitched headlong into the creek beneath, impelled thither by a kick that would have sent a football from one goal to the other.

There was a splash as he struck the water, a more frenzied yell, a scurry, and a snap like the closing of a steel tiger-trap.

Hurriedly placing the child behind the rock, I turned to help the Sirdar. But he was wiping his sabre on some wet moss, whilst I heard a great rushing and plunging in the river—manifestly the crocodiles were much aroused.

Mohammed Khan smiled until his white teeth shone in the moonlight.

'"Tis ended, sahib,' he cried. 'The river-god is entertaining his worshippers by eating them.'

I picked up the child, and took the shawl from her head. Into her terrified face came a gleam of recognition, for I had often given her sweets. Yet she sobbed,

and clung to me, saying in her three-year-old prattle—

'Mamma! Bad man, mamma! Howwid man!'

'Yes, dearie,' I said, 'but it was only a game. Don't cry. We are going to mamma now.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE DESTINY OF THE EMERALD EYE

Mayhap some fair lady, who has done me the honour thus far to follow the records of the Sirdar and myself, may be inclined to exclaim, with as close an imitation of petulance as a charming woman is capable of—

'The wretch must be a misogynist. Here has he married two couples happily in the course of his story, but not a hint has he given of any personal *tendresse*.'

Well, madam, you are right. I pray you, pardon me. I laboured under the delusion that my profession, my studies, and my violin filled my life to the exclusion of diviner emotions. I was wrong. When the test came, I yielded without a blow, flung myself at the goddess's feet with all the ardour of a callow youth.

I have to thank the River Indus for more than one chapter in my checkered

existence. That which I am now about to relate is a whole volume in itself.

People of much less education than Macaulay's schoolboy—who, by the way, must have been a very precocious youngster—will not require to be told that the great province of the Punjab takes its name from two Persian words signifying 'five rivers.' The most northerly, and by far the most important, of these is the Indus, the other four being tributaries. This latter fact, though it lessens the grandeur of the minor streams, does not, to the ordinary observer, diminish their volume. At certain seasons of the year the Sutlej and the Jhelum are between two and three miles in width.

Travelling northwards from Lahore in the Calcutta mail, you are treated at midnight to a startling incident, which serves to enlighten you considerably as to the extent and peculiarities of an Indian river. Everybody is, or ought to be, sound asleep, when the train suddenly comes to a standstill. At sea, when the screw ceases to revolve, the unwonted silence serves to awaken the whole ship's company; the total absence of the bustling noise of a railway station acts similarly in this in-

stance. One's first impulse is to open the window and look out. You find that the train is standing on a bridge, beneath which there is the sound of rushing, tumbling, foaming water, stretching away into infinite darkness. One object is, however, clearly defined—a huge notice-board, bearing the uncanny legend, 'All trains stop dead here.' After a few anxious moments the engine drags slowly forward. Perhaps a mile is thus traversed, and you are about to settle down again for the night, when the train stops a second time. Down goes the window, out goes your head, to find the first scene repeated: girders, black, noisy water, and notice-board complete. Another awe-inspiring pause, and once more the engine moves. You have merely crossed the Jhelum by a bridge some two miles in length, and not remarkable for its stability. But the novice generally seeks the solace of a whisky-and-soda, eked out by a cigar, before he retires to rest for the third time. And this river is but one of five that constitute the mighty Indus during its last stage of five hundred miles to the sea.

At six o'clock on a June evening, a red-

letter date for me, a well-appointed dog-cart, with a neat Waziri pony in the shafts, was led round to the porch of the largest bungalow in the remote station of Faizabad, situate some ninety miles from the junction of the Jhelum and the Chenab. Both rivers join the Indus, and on the left bank of the former stands Faizabad.

It had been a very hot day. Even now, when the burning sun was sinking below the horizon, the thermometer stood at 106° in the verandah. Yet at this hour the European inhabitants generally drove out to rendezvous at the club or tennis ground, or sought a breath of fresh air, hot as it was, by a rapid spin over the only hard road the station boasted.

The servants were taking down the heavy outer mats and inner screens of scented grass that met the double need of keeping out the sun and admitting moisture-laden air to the interior of the house, when a young lady appeared on the verandah, attired in a fresh, cool-looking white dress, with a large blue sash, a broad-brimmed straw hat, and a neat pair of brown shoes.

This hazel-eyed English girl was a

delightful apparition of dainty loveliness, as she stood there pulling on her tan-coloured driving-gloves. Her sweet presence lent life and colour to the dull arches of the verandah, and more than atoned for the desolate misery of the sun-scorched plain and the leaden-hued flood rolling in the distance.

At least, that is the way in which I have pictured her in my mind's eye, and I know I am right.

Judging from the manner of his smile, a tall, spare, bronzed man in riding apparel, who came round the corner of the building just as she was springing into the dog-cart, would have endorsed my description.

'Hullo, Sybil; where are you off to?' he shouted.

'For a pull on the Jhelum, dad.'

'My dear, the river is in flood! It is hardly safe.'

'Oh! I shall keep in the back-wash; and I'm nearly dead from being boxed up in the house all day.' And she gathered the reins in her hands.

'But really——' he expostulated.

'No time to argue. The bay won't stand. Let go, syce. Don't play too many

rubbers at the club, but be home sharp at eight for dinner, you old darling.'

The last words were shrieked out as the pony flew from the drive into the road, whilst the bare-legged groom was running his best to try and climb to the back seat.

Mr. Etherington, Commissioner of Faizabad, watched his only and motherless daughter with a happy smile on his face until she disappeared among the trees, and then turned into the house to fill his cigar-case before riding to the club to indulge in his daily rubber.

Meanwhile, Miss Sybil Etherington, aged twenty, heart-whole, save where her father was concerned—the adored of many 'subs,' 'assistants,' 'joints,' and other mysteriously abbreviated military and civil officers—sped rapidly towards the boat-house. By chance, she was the only person in the station who sought the river that evening.

The boating sub-committee of the Gymkhana Club had resolved on the previous day that outriggers should not be unhoused during the swollen state of the stream, an immense volume of water having been

created by the melting of the snows in the Himalayas. Miss Sybil, therefore, had to content herself with the less graceful but safer 'tub.'

The back-wash ran out a quarter of a mile from the bank, and there was little fear of accident in any portion of this strip of water; but I regret to state that the young lady was in the habit of taking 'just a few strokes' in the main stream. In other words, she had to pull against a current travelling some six or seven miles an hour until she felt tired, and then allow her boat to edge into the back-wash and drift quietly to the landing-place.

When she had rowed a short distance from the boat-house the native attendant remembered that there was a serious fracture in the blade of one of the oars. There were dozens of sound oars in store, and he had merely to recall her in order to rectify the mistake. But the miss-sahib might be angry with him, and call him an ass. His hookah, too, was just nicely lit. And what did it matter? The oar had lasted two years—why should it break now? So he squatted on his haunches, and blew the white ash from the glowing charcoal to

make sure the hookah was in perfect order.

Meanwhile, Sybil was urging her little craft onward. Soon she shot out into the fair-way, as a sailor would term it. That day the current was very strong. Pulling with all the strength of her supple arms, she could barely gain a couple of feet at each stroke, and the recovery must be effected in desperate haste if even that small progress were to hold good.

A very few minutes of this tremendous exertion sufficed to exhaust even Miss Etherington's ample stock of energy. Just a last effort, and then she would shoot back across the stream to the smooth patch within.

Then the oar broke in the midst of a strenuous tug, and she fell over the seat, striking her head with some force against the ribs on the port side; for it was the right-hand blade which had snapped. The shock caused her to let go the starboard oar. It was swept overboard in a second. So, when she gathered her senses, she found herself left with a piece of rounded wood, some four feet long, in a small open boat which was absolutely at the mercy

of the Jhelum river. She was scudding along at the rate of six miles an hour, whilst the day was changing into night with the remarkable rapidity peculiar to India.

She stood up in the boat—hoping that her white dress might attract attention—until both banks were hidden in the growing darkness. Then she sat down and wept at the thought of the agony her father would suffer until they met again. Miss Sybil Etherington was no coward.

The native boatman saw the accident happen. He saw her swept away by the current, and knew that in all human probability her small craft would be overturned by colliding with a submerged tree or rock. A white man would have jumped into another boat and gone after her, in the reasonable hope of catching up with her and effecting a safe landing some miles farther down the river. But the native emptied the charcoal from the bowl of his hookah, rolled that valuable article into portable form, and went to fetch his blanket, stick, and brass pot from the straw wattle which served as his abode.

It was a hard thing, this, to leave his easy employment and fifteen rupees a month; but the Commissioner-sahib would assuredly kill him. God was great, and the sahib's anger was an awful thing.

His preparations were soon made, and he glided off into the road. There he passed the miss-sahib's dog-cart, with the syce sitting at the pony's feet.

'Whither goest thou, brother?' said the syce.

'To Calcutta, to see my aged father before he dies,' was the reply; and he passed silently among the trees, to be seen no more in Faizabad.

At half-past eight a large boat, built for the use of the local police, shot out into the stream, a sepoy holding aloft a flaring pine-torch in the bows. Next to the police *jemadar*[1] who steered, sat Mr. Etherington, with the expression on his face of a man who is looking into the Valley of the Shadow. Once before had he gazed into its dread depths, when he held his young wife in his arms dying in the delirium of fever. Now it was his daughter who had gone—Sybil, his dear

[1] Sergeant.

one—engulfed in the noisy, whirling, gruesome chaos beyond.

For a long time—it seemed to be many hours to the silent, grief-stricken man glaring hopelessly into the murky darkness—the boat sped forward, impelled by eight well-manned oars, when suddenly the *naik*[1] in the bows gave a startled yell of warning.

It was too late.

Unknown to the steersman, they had entered a big curve in the river, which was dashed aside by a rocky promontory. In their wild journey they had crossed the stream, and a few seconds later the nose of the boat smashed into the projecting bank. She was instantly caught by the current, swung round broadside by the stern, and overturned. Eleven men made a fierce struggle for life, and when they gathered on the bank, bruised and bleeding, the *naik* with a broken arm, four were missing. Mr. Etherington had escaped, but the *jemadar* and three sepoys would never again taste the salt of the Sirkar.

The crocodiles of the Jhelum are of a very large species, and, like their friends

[1] Corporal.

of the Attock, they require feeding; otherwise they would die.

A day of burning heat came and went, and yet another dawn was suffusing the sky with a golden glory, too soon to change to a hue of burnished copper, when I commenced the hours of wakefulness very badly by using a number of words not to be found in any recognised dictionary of the English language.

There was a reason. My methodical Mussulman 'bearer,' as is the habit of his country, had entered the tent to arouse his master. Abdul Khan was carrying in his hands a cup of hot coffee and two pieces of buttered toast, the *chota hazri*, or 'little breakfast,' with which Anglo-Indian exiles are wont to refresh themselves before donning their riding garments for the early morning gallop.

But the interior of the tent was dark, and Abdul Khan stumbled over my riding-boots, which lay anyhow on the ground. So the coffee and toast went over my back instead of down my throat.

Abdul Khan was forthwith violently ejected. When he returned with a fresh supply of coffee and toast, I was dressed

and had regained my usual state of careless good-humour. By this time a strongly-built country-bred was champing his bit in front of the tent; and ere long I was in the saddle, enjoying the cool but all too brief stillness of the opening day in a canter over the desert.

During a forty minutes' ride the only living things I saw were a jackal and a wolf, slinking away from the rapidly whitening bones of one of my own bullocks, which had died during the march to the present place of encampment. I would not have been in this outlandish spot at this season of the year had there not been serious cause. A Trans-Indus tribe had shown some signs of uneasiness—in other words, they had cut the throats of some of their neighbours—and the headmen had been summoned to meet the political officer of the district in order to receive a stern warning, whilst giving them an opportunity of disclosing their grievances. Jones, the local 'political,' was bowled over by enteric, and I was despatched in his stead to interview the tribesmen. They were to cross the Indus in one of the huge flat-bottomed boats which alone are safe ferries.

As I returned to my tent I noticed some little commotion at the edge of the river. It could hardly be the tribal representatives, I could distinguish no boat, and there was no noise. Moreover, they were not expected for at least two days.

I was about to shout to my bearer to prepare my bath, when that worthy came running up in a state of unusual excitement, vainly endeavouring to rearrange his turban, which had fallen off.

'Sahib,' he said, after a frantic effort to regain his usual dignified mien, 'a miss-sahib has arrived.'

'What?' I shouted, using the Hindustani word *kya*, into which much more amazement can be thrown than into its English equivalent. The arrival of the man in the moon would have astonished me only a degree more than the advent of a European lady in such a locality.

'What sort of miss-sahib?'

'A *pukka* (real) miss-sahib; but she is dead.'

I asked no further questions. This ridiculous story must be seen into personally, so I remounted the pony and rode off to the group on the bank. There I found

Sybil Etherington, who had been lifted out of her boat and laid on a rude trestle brought from the syce's quarters. The girl was indeed dead to all appearance, and very beautiful she looked, only her poor hands and wrists were cruelly blistered by the sun.

Anglo-Indians are accustomed to act promptly. I fancied I could detect a slight breathing, and I then gazed wildly around for a woman, to realise a moment later that the nearest village was twenty miles away. True, there was a small hamlet on the other side of the Indus; but it might as well be in Persia. I strove to remember all the fainting scenes I had read in novels. They mostly resolved themselves into the hero frantically casting himself on his knees by the side of the heroine, and murmuring, 'Darling, speak to me!' Clearly this did not meet the case, and in none of these pathetic incidents were practical recipes given for restoring the fair one to consciousness. But something must be done to ascertain whether this most marvellous visitor were alive or not. After listening intently, I felt certain that her heart was beating. I filled my *sola topi*

with water from the river, and dashed a small quantity on her face. I directed my bearer to repeat this cold *douche* at intervals whilst I propped her head on the charpoy and worked her arms backwards and forwards gently to promote respiration.

Whether or not this was the proper treatment I could not for the life of me say, but I argued that it could do no harm, and might do good.

At last I was delighted to see signs of returning vitality; before long Sybil opened those wonderful brown eyes of hers, and the glance went to my soul. She tried to speak, and even smiled faintly when she saw my white face with its anxious look; but she only uttered some unintelligible sound.

By this time the sun was becoming unbearably hot. The trestle, with its wonderful occupant, was carried to the tent, where I lifted her on to the more comfortable camp-bed. Brandy and water was my first thought, and she was able to swallow a little. Two eggs, beaten up and mixed with more brandy, formed my next remedy; and a couple of wretched fowls were executed to be converted into chicken soup. The

result of all this was that ere long Sybil was able to sit up, resting against a pillow backed by a saddle.

She told me her story in disjointed sentences, for she was very weak. Strong man as I was, I shuddered at the recital. Twice during the first night she had managed to save her light craft from being overturned by rocks, by using the broken piece of the oar which remained in the boat. All the next day she endeavoured to attract the attention of villagers. They saw her, but were powerless. Several boats passed at too great a distance to render assistance. One craft, which was nearer, did try to help her, but her little punt was carried along by the stream faster than the clumsy and heavily-laden vessel could move. After a pursuit of some miles the natives gave it up, and hoisted their sails to make way up stream again. Every effort to reach the friendly back-wash was in vain. Once she came very near the bank at a curve, but an eddy hurled her away into the current. And oh, that dreadful sun!—'More soup!' I yelled to the bearer—how it burned her! Just look at her poor hands. 'Vaseline,' I suggested, and a frenzied hunt through

leather trunks resulted in the triumphant production of a small bottle. She had almost given up hope when the second night closed in without any succour or apparent hope of escape. But she remained quite conscious throughout the weary vigil; and it was well, for the short pole again saved her from shipwreck. It was not until the morning dawned, and she found the boat drifting quietly to the shore, that she fainted, at the very time when strength was most needed to scull with the broken oar, and make sure of landing safely.

'So you really had not been long in the state in which the *bhisti*[1] discovered you?'

'No, I suppose not,' said Sybil.

'Do you know that you have travelled nearly two hundred miles?'

It was now Sybil's turn to be amazed.

'And that you have been over forty hours without food? Great Scot! you must be starving with hunger, and here am I talking as though you had dropped in to afternoon tea!'

I rushed to the door of the tent and shouted—

'Boil two more chickens at once; kill

[1] Water-carrier.

that lamb and roast it; and look here, Abdul Khan, if you don't make better coffee than you did this morning, I'll cause jackals to tear up your father's grave! Fetch the coffee and some toast, and a lot of boiled eggs at once!'

What other additions I might have made to the *menu* I know not, but I was interrupted by the sound of weeping from within the tent. Sybil was in tears at the thought of the anguish her father was suffering. Measures must be taken immediately to inform him of her safety and whereabouts. This was no easy matter. The only practicable plan was to send a messenger to a town seventy miles down the Indus, and thence telegraph to Faizabad. A syce on the pony might manage that before the next morning, so the man was packed off at once with the necessary message, and given enough money to procure another horse if the hardy country-bred proved unequal to the task.

'But how am I to get home?' said Sybil, as the pony's hoof-beats died away in the distance.

'That will be settled when your father arrives,' I answered.

'Do you think he will come to-morrow?' she asked with an alarmed look.

'Miss Etherington,' I gravely replied, 'you must not give way to anxiety, but he cannot possibly be here for at least four days. The syce cannot even bring a reply to your telegram until late on Saturday, and it is now Thursday.'

Sybil was about to say something, when I remembered my rôle as doctor.

'There's some more chicken soup coming,' I said, 'and after that some coffee and toast and boiled eggs. They are just going to roast a lamb; and if you would like a quail pie——'

In spite of all her pain and troubles Sybil laughed—a mere ghost of a little laugh; but I suddenly discovered that the 'rippling sunshine of the face,' which Dryden wrote of, was, after all, a real thing and not a poet's fancy.

'You seem to think I am in need of a whole month's provisions at once,' she cried. 'Please give me a small instalment when I wake. What I really want is sleep.'

Silently condemning myself as a blundering idiot for forgetting nature's best remedy, I withdrew, and curled up on a camp-stool

in the baggage tent to reflect over the extraordinary events of the morning.

When the sun had gone down, and a cool breeze came from the river, Sybil made her appearance, greatly refreshed by a cold bath, save that the water had caused her hands to smart terribly. Notwithstanding this drawback she had a very nice little dinner in the open air; and, when Sybil retired for the night, I regret to state that I solemnly drank to the health of the careless boatman, the broken oar, the rivers Jhelum, Chenab, and Indus, and all the other remarkable circumstances which led to the advent of this fair goddess. The Government of India, which I had roundly abused for sending me to this outlandish spot, was evidently composed of a most wise and far-seeing body of men; and, as for the offending tribesmen, their sins were forgiven them.

The next four days passed like a dream. Never did Abdul Khan make such coffee and such buttered toast. The hens certainly laid much finer and larger eggs, and the goat chops, *alias* mutton cutlets, could not be surpassed in Dolgelly. I produced my violin, and Sybil knew all my music. She

taught me Gounod's 'Serenade,' which was not in my collection, by whistling it until I mastered the entire composition. I played it a dozen times with the mute on, after she had gone to rest. I thought she could not hear me; but she did, and partly guessed the reason for such marked appreciation on my part. Next morning she tried to be very stately, but relented when she saw how I was racking my brains to discover in what way I had offended her. When she declined another egg with cold politeness I knocked over the coffee-pot from sheer nervousness; and a 'No, thank you' to curried chicken made me utterly miserable.

I was dealing with the tribesmen when Mr. Etherington arrived. When I saw father and daughter rush into each other's arms a fierce pain at my heart caused me to use such dire threats to the headmen of the mutinous mountaineers that they quite caved in, and promised to be good for ever if only the Sirkar would give them another chance.

Next to seeing her father, Sybil was most pleased by a mule-load of fresh clothes; and she very speedily seized the opportunity of donning a new frock, far

prettier than the white gown, this latter having perforce seen so much service. Yet I harboured a wild thought of bribing Abdul Khan to steal that soiled white dress, so that I might keep it as a souvenir of the brightest days in my life.

But Mr. Etherington raised me to the seventh heaven by kindly pressing me to march back with them to Faizabad, and wire for ten days' leave.

On the last night of my all too brief holiday I was standing by Sybil's side in the drawing-room. We had just finished playing the famous 'Serenade' as a duet, and she was about to close the piano, when I felt that I must positively know that there was no hope for me before I returned to my desert.

'We played that very well,' I said.

I suppose there was a vibrato in my voice as I uttered those commonplace words that caused my hearer's heart to beat more quickly than usual. Anyhow, she would not face my eyes.

'Yes,' she replied, 'it's a lovely thing.'

'I hope we shall often play it together again,' I went on, trying desperately to remain calm, and talking at random.

'Why, of course we shall.'

This rather nervously; she knew I was not uttering mere compliments, and she was obliged to twist round on the seat and stare at the piano.

'Sybil,' I said, laying down my violin, bending over her, and placing a trembling hand on her arm, 'I cannot go away without telling you that I love you. I want you for a partner during the rest of my life, in music as in all else. Is there any hope for me?'

Mr. Etherington summed up the situation a little later in the evening by remarking that he had a foreboding his daughter was lost to him. She might just as well have been gobbled up by the Indus as come back on a six months' deposit.

And we all laughed, for two of us thought it was the funniest joke we had ever heard . . .

When I broke the news to the Sirdar he growled that some evil thing must surely befall me when he was not by my side.

But he relented when I showed him Sybil's photograph, and his grim face quite relaxed on my swearing—in fluent Persian

be it noted—that my intended wife was as eager to make his acquaintance as I had been to recite his exploits.

'By the beard of the Prophet!' he cried, 'that emerald eye which I took from Hanumàn will come in useful now, sahib.'

Believe me, I had forgotten it.

When next I had the nerve to ask for and obtain district leave, I hurried to Faizabad and gave Sybil her engagement ring.

'Oh,' she murmured rapturously, 'what a stone! And all these lovely diamonds around it! Reggie, you silly man, it must have cost you a year's pay!'

I let it rest at that. There were circumstances . . .

CHAPTER IX

HOW WE GUARDED THE GREAT PEARL NECKLACE

THUS a paragraph in the *Pioneer* :—

Yesterday, shortly before noon, the Maharàjah of Tolah, a small native state in the Punjab, died at Mussoorie from heart trouble, consequent on a severe attack of rheumatic fever. His death was expected, and Mr. William Terrant, C.I.E., Political Agent at Tolah, was present during the Maharàjah's dying hours. Tragic import is added to the event, however, by the fact that, five hours later, whilst the aged Diwàn of Tolah State was hastening to convey the sad intelligence to the Maharàjah's successor, he was fatally stabbed by some one unknown. He was found lying in a corridor of the palace, and expired shortly afterwards.

The affair savours of the murder and intrigue so often associated with native states in India when a fresh occupant ascends the *guddi*, but, in this instance, there is no question of succession involving rival interests. The Maharàjah's heir is a young prince of nineteen, his eldest son, a youth of much promise, and one who has received a

liberal English education. His father, a wise and judicious ruler, appointed him head of the State during an enforced residence in the hills, and the relations between the two were of a most affectionate character. The murdered Prime Minister, too, was highly esteemed by all classes, so the assassin's object cannot be even guessed at.

Tolah, our readers will be aware, is fully five hundred miles distant from Mussoorie, and it has been ascertained beyond all doubt that the only telegraphic message transmitted from the hill station to Tolah, between the death of the Maharàjah and the foul murder of the Diwàn, was that sent by Mr. Terrant to the Minister. This was couched in a secret code. Indeed, the fact of the Maharàjah's demise could not be generally known in the state until this morning.

The Government of India will institute a full and searching inquiry by its responsible Agent, as similar dramatic incidents are far too frequent in the self-governed states.'

We naturally discussed the tragedy at mess that night. The colonel was pleased to drag me into it.

'This is the kind of job that appeals to you, Wayne. I suppose we shall lose you and the Sirdar for another month or six weeks.'

'You seem to regard us as a distinct branch of the detective police,' I said.

'The Government of India do, at any rate. But mark my words. It will not be an easy task to find the true culprit. You must fly at high game this time.'

'Oh,' I replied carelessly, 'Terrant will work unaided. He knows the place thoroughly, and will sift the business to the bottom. The Sirdar's sabre is not the instrument to unravel this knot.'

'I differ from you on both heads. Government will assuredly call upon you, and I will back Mohammed Khan's No. 1 cut against the scratching of the diplomatic pen any day.'

The colonel was right. Next day he sent for me after early morning parade.

'This is a bigger thing than either of us expected,' he said. 'Not only are you and Mohammed Khan to accompany Terrant to Tolah, but I am directed to furnish a squadron from the regiment to act as escort, and the men are to carry a field allowance of ammunition. The young Maharàjah has disappeared also!'

Sixteen hours' misery in a troop-train brought us across the Punjab desert from Lahore to the mud walls of Tolah. Terrant, an uncommonly nice fellow, devoid of the

hauteur too often attached to the Bengal civilian, was unfeignedly pleased to meet me again, and did not hesitate to take the Sirdar and myself thoroughly into his confidence.

But he had little to tell. The Maharàjah dead, the Diwàn murdered, the heir missing and perhaps buried—this combination of events savoured of the bolt from the blue so popular in fiction, so infrequent in fact.

The Rajah's body was *en route* to Tolah, packed in ice, in order to be cremated on a special pyre of scented sandal-wood. The Prime Minister was already reduced to ashes, and Gopal Singh, the youngster, had been spirited away the night after his father's demise.

The whole state was disturbed—Tolah itself in an uproar—everybody so distracted that it was utterly impossible to obtain an intelligible narrative from any of the servants or officials. One man alone kept his senses, the able and opulent comptroller of the taxes, Bhugwàn Dass. He it was who maintained public order until our arrival, who made fitting arrangements for the obsequies of his royal master and the Diwàn, who organised a thorough if un-

successful search for Gopal Singh, and who now—guardedly and with the reluctance of a man who adheres strictly to that only which he knows—gave us the first faint clue towards elucidating a difficult problem.

Gopal Singh's mother was long since dead, but one of the ladies in the zenana had a five-year-old son, for whom the deceased ruler had made ample provision.

Terrant was aware of the circumstance, of course. When Bhugwàn Dass mentioned it the eyes of the two men met, but the strong, self-reliant face of the native betrayed no hidden meaning to his words.

We three were alone. For motives of my own, I allowed no inhabitant of Tolah to suspect that Mohammed Khan performed other duties than those attached to his military rank.

'Where is this woman now?' asked the agent.

'In the zenana.' This high-placed Hindu disdained to use the term 'sahib.'

'I must see her.'

'It is impossible. She is *purdah nashin*.'[1]

[1] 'Hidden by the screen.' In other words, invisible to a member of the opposite sex.

'I am no child, Bhugwàn Dass. I well know she is *purdah nashin*; nevertheless, Captain Wayne and I must see her within the hour.'

'There may be trouble in the bazaar when it becomes known. The people are sufficiently excited already.'

Again Terrant looked keenly at the other. He was quite as well qualified to weigh all the difficulties of the situation as Bhugwàn Dass himself, and the latter knew it. Why, then, all this trite counsel? British agents in native states have, or should have, a very emphatic way with them. Terrant dismissed the subject by saying—

'I have spoken. My order to you is to conduct Moti Bhai hither forthwith.'

It seemed to me that Bhugwàn Dass was annoyed, yet satisfied — pleased at the turn taken by events, but bitterly resentful of Terrant's imperious manner.

'I dislike that fellow,' said the agent, when we were alone. 'He is altogether too immaculate for a native.'

The slamming and fastening of doors, the rapid disappearance of every male servant, and the posting of sentries at

all exits, soon announced that a lady from the zenana was about to pass through an unusual part of the palace. Moti Bhai was carried across the courtyard in a palanquin and set down close to the verandah of our room. When the curtains were lifted by a female attendant, a veiled and shrouded figure tripped lightly out, ran up the steps and entered our apartment.

Glancing quickly round to see if there were others present than Terrant and myself, she threw aside her veil and came nearer. She was a handsome woman, with the oval face, straight nose, and arched eyebrows of the well-bred Hindu, her complexion, too, being marvellously white and clear. I regarded her curiously. She was the first native lady of such high and exclusive caste I had set eyes on in India, nor is it probable that such an opportunity will ever present itself to me again.

Without the slightest shyness or restraint in her manner, Moti Bhai cast herself on her knees before Terrant, and the tears welled forth as she said—

'Sahib, I know what you would ask,

but I am innocent. I loved my lord, the Maharàjah, father of my child. I respected the Diwàn, an ever-gracious and generous man. The young Maharàjah I have never seen, but people speak golden things of him. I have done no wrong, sahibs, and, were it permitted, I would lie on the funeral pyre by the side of my lord, the Maharàjah.'

Personally, I believed the woman from the first moment. Terrant was sceptical.

'We have not accused thee, Moti Bhai. Of what art thou innocent?'

'Of the Diwàn's death, sahib, or the disappearance of the prince. And have I not been accused? Has not Bhugwàn Dass told you I would like to seat my son upon the *guddi*?'[1]

She flashed her brilliant eyes vengefully from Terrant to me. If the trained diplomatist could school his face to resist this surprising thrust I could not, for she cried—

'Believe him not, sahiba. I know nought against him save that for his own purpose he has whispered evil things about me. Behold! Sooner than be

[1] Throne.

deemed faithless to the Maharàjah I would——'

Terrant and I sprang at her and wrested a long thin dagger from her hand, though she struggled like a wild cat in her wrathful grief.

Listen, Moti Bhai,' said Terrant sternly, when her hysteria was calmed somewhat. 'We want no more deaths by violence. You can serve us best by living. We deem you guiltless of wrongdoing, but we want your help to find the murderers, and you *can* help us by safeguarding your son and closing your mouth.'

After some further questioning the interview ended. With the removal of the guards came Mohammed Khan, and I guessed from his manner that his visit did not concern the muster-roll he carried for all men to see.

Saluting us, he said: 'I have news, sahiba. The body of the Maharàjah has arrived. Whilst it rested during the night at Ghaziabad Junction, the coffin was broken open, and the Maharàjah's garments were disturbed at the neck, as though some one searched for a hidden object. It caused much trouble, too, as

the weather is hot, and the ice—well, it is no matter.'

The Sirdar's statement excited Terrant.

'Hast more to tell?' he cried.

'Even so, sahib. I have found old friends in the palace. They whisper that, although the Diwàn was stabbed in the breast, his garments had been torn open round the throat after he fell.

Terrant, in his excitement, jumped from his chair with an exclamation that was not Urdu. Taking a leather wallet from his pocket, he took out a slender gold chain with a network purse of golden wire attached.

'This is what they sought,' he said. 'Now I know why a determined attempt was made to rob me last night, an attempt frustrated only by the unexpected presence of a fox-terrier in my bedroom.'

He opened the purse and produced three steel keys, differently sized, and quaintly designed. The largest had wards fashioned in the form of an elephant, the next resembled a tiger, the third, a tiny affair, suggested by its radiated spikes the conventional idea of the rising or setting sun.

'Which of these is the key of the mystery?' I inquired, so he turned to Mohammed Khan—

'Shortly before the Maharàjah's death he cleared his room of attendants and bade me take this chain from his neck. He informed me that the keys had reference to the private treasury of the palace, and that he would trust them to none but me for delivery to his son, who, together with the Diwàn, knew their exact significance. He went on to say that there was another set in existence, but was disturbed by a noise outside, and became so terrified lest the keys should be seen in my possession that I hastily put them away. He was then nearing the end, so I called the doctor, and we had no other opportunity for private conversation.'

The Sirdar silently pondered his words.

'The other set,' he said at last, 'were kept by the Diwàn, sahib?'

'Most probably; but who has them now?'

'The young Maharàjah, for certain,' I chimed in.

'Why?'

'Because the Diwàn was killed by some one who hoped to obtain them but was disappointed, as the Diwàn, knowing his old master was dying, and being himself feeble, had already transferred his trust to the heir, Gopal Singh.'

'Likely enough, but what has become of Gopal Singh?'

'If he kept the keys on his person he is dead. If he elected to hide them in a place of safety he is alive and in captivity until he reveals their whereabouts.'

Our talk alternated between Persian and English, so I explained my theory afresh to Mohammed Khan. As usual, he came to the point.

'Bhugwàn Dass,' he commenced, uttering the name that was uppermost in our thoughts, 'has many crores of rupees.'

'Yes; what if it be so?'

'They say in the bazaar, sahib, that none but Bhugwàn Dass shall become Diwàn.'

'Then why this talk about him? He has nought to gain by killing anybody. Confound Bhugwàn Dass! He crops up everywhere,' interrupted Terrant impatiently.

Now, a political agent is a very big man

indeed in India, but the magic title had no glamour for me, so I said with candid emphasis: 'If you can't keep your temper, Terrant, and let the Sirdar go to work in his own way, we shall leave you to explain the business to Government in the manner that best suits yourself.'

Terrant forthwith cooled down. Above all things he dreaded failure. Moreover, he began to realise that I was no longer the young griffin of Bombay. Oblivious of this little tiff the native continued—

'Can we take the pattern of those keys, sahib?'

'Yes, I am able to do it myself.' Turning to me, Terrant exclaimed: 'It is a hobby of mine to be an amateur locksmith.'

'Then, sahib,' said Mohammed Khan gravely, 'let it be done. Afterwards they must be stolen. The man who uses them can tell us much. But first—we should see that treasury.'

I looked at him sharply. I knew much concerning him, but this time his motive was beyond suspicion. We were in the palace alone, and time pressed. Terrant, temporarily, of course, was supreme. He was one of the few acquainted with the

locality of the Maharàjah's vaults, so we quickly stood before the iron-bound door which shrouded them.

The first key fitted easily in the lock, and the door swung back so rapidly that Mohammed Khan jumped in and seized it. The thought was timely. The heavy mass of wood and iron, once released from the restraining bolt, was pressed open by a strong spring. Had it gone back to the full extent a small cannon would have exploded with noise enough to alarm the palace.

The Maharàjah knew how to guard his wealth from secret marauders, but the Sirdar was no novice in the art of exploring native treasure-chambers.

Once within the vault we released the spring and curiously examined our surroundings. It was pitch dark save for the space illuminated by the open doorway, and we made little progress until the rissaldar-major brought a lamp. Then we could see a series of arches, and in each division a number of huge, iron-clamped, padlocked boxes, filled, no doubt, with many lakhs of rupees.

For none of those could the remaining

delicate keys be of service, but in the farthest arched recess on the right we found a narrow door which the second key opened without difficulty.

A small square room, containing several European safes and oriental cabinets, was now revealed, and Terrant observed—

'This place probably holds the state jewels, some gold and papers—title-deeds and others.'

After much puzzled scrutiny and trial we found that the second key also fitted one of the cabinets. Once this difficulty was removed we experienced no further delay. The last of the three keys unlocked a beautiful iron casket inlaid with silver—a perfect specimen of Rajput art—and in another instant we feasted our eyes on a necklace which, I think even yet, was the most perfect ornament I have ever seen.

It consisted of forty large pearls, each of which, I have since been told by experts, was worth at least £4000. Between each pearl was a small cluster of diamonds. It is no figure of speech to describe the collection as priceless. Articles of far less intrinsic value are catalogued among the notable things of earth. This necklace

undoubtedly had a history. Its glorious iridescence must have caused many a brain to reel with madness, many a heart to dream of crime. The mere fact that Terrant, after two years' residence in the state, had never heard of the existence of these marvellous gems, showed that there was something eerie in the Maharàjah's possession of such a treasure. Personally, I glanced around covertly at the sight of them, as though I harboured some guilty secret.

Mohammed Khan's eyes glinted ominously for a little while, but at last he recovered himself.

'By the tomb of Mahomet!' he murmured, 'Bhugwàn Dass is a rich man, but he could never buy that *tauk*.'

'No,' growled Terrant, 'but he might afford to steal it.'

Whatever the future would reveal our course of action was clear. We replaced the necklace in its casket. As the lid fell the glare of the lamp seemed to become suddenly dimmed.

Terrant toiled all the afternoon in his workshop, filing and hammering bits of iron until he was certain that the wards of the

duplicates corresponded with the originals. Then he sent for Bhugwàn Dass to question him concerning the funds available for the current expenses of the state, mentioning incidentally that the late Maharàjah had given over to his temporary care the keys of the treasury.

He told me subsequently that the native exhibited no sign of interest at the announcement, beyond taking official note of the fact. Bhugwàn Dass was truly a man of iron nerve.

Failing to raise his game on this scent, the political agent asked if there were any tidings of the young Maharàjah, Gopal Singh.

In this matter the other betrayed more animation.

'I am now fully convinced,' he said, 'that, with or without the knowledge of Moti Bhai, there is a plot to placeher son on the throne. He is but a child. His succession means a regency, and a regency means opportunities for ambitious men.'

'Where must we look for the conspirators, Bhugwàn Dass?'

'I know not. 'Tis well hidden, this project. But if ever Moti Bhai's son be

proclaimed heir, with the mother as regent, look among her chief ministers for those who have made away with Gopal Singh.'

This reasoning was so sound that for the moment it staggered Terrant's suspicions. Yet he resolved to test the astute Rajput Brahmin to the end. Rising, to close the interview, he turned and locked the three treasury keys with some papers in his desk, fully conscious that Bhugwàn Dass observed the unostentatious act as he quitted the room.

To outwit our adversary, whoever he might be, we were compelled to plot skilfully ourselves. If every man in the world has his price, all that need be said of Indian humanity is that the scale is low. It was a mere matter of payment for our servants, Terrant's native clerks, the officials of the Ràj—practically each person in contact with us—to become the spies and emissaries of our opponents.

Nevertheless, by the exercise of some ingenuity, Terrant and I were ostensibly enjoying an after-dinner cigar on the flat roof of his bungalow, whilst, in reality, we were ensconced with Mohammed Khan behind the huge silver-filled cases in the

treasury. We were impersonated on the roof by an engine-driver and guard, both Englishmen, impounded from the station. They, nothing loth, drank our whisky, smoked our cheroots and wore our clothes; three sowars from my regiment guarded the approaches to the roof and forbade even Terrant's house servants to disturb them (or us). To lend verisimilitude to the deception, the fox-terrier was tied to the leg of the table.

At nine o'clock—the hour when our doubles were confidentially discussing the iniquities of the deputy-assistant traffic superintendent—the main door of the treasure vault swung open, and was cautiously adjusted by some one acquainted with its peculiarities.

Absolutely hidden as we were, we could neither see nor be seen, owing to the angle of the entrance. The newcomer carried a lamp, and we knew by the steady light that he held it aloft to gaze around. The door of the second chamber, it will be remembered, was on the extreme right of the vault.

We crouched in the deep shade of two gigantic boxes on the extreme left, and the

inch or two of interstice between them commanded the length of the vault and a view of the smaller door.

Apparently satisfied with his first scrutiny, the lamp-bearer advanced into the interior. We were not surprised to see the stalwart form and immobile features —now set in tense determination—of Bhugwàn Dass. We expected him. The stage was set for the chief actor in this drama of death and mystery, and he had appeared.

He walked quickly toward the second door, unlocked it, and, after another glance around, entered. Terrant and I would have risen, but Mohammed Khan, a true artist himself, restrained us. And it was well. An instant later Bhugwàn Dass reappeared, lamp in hand. His flaming eyes sought floor, wall, and vaulted roof for hostile sign. It was not yet too late for explanation, however lame, of his presence in this secret place. But in this stronghold of stone not even a scurrying rat disturbed him, and at last, quite sure he was unobserved, he again vanished from our cramped field of vision.

Slowly we rose, to creep over the floor in

list slippers until the supreme moment when we were opposite the entrance to the lesser apartment. We saw Bhugwàn Dass, delayed by the same difficulty we had experienced, open the cabinet and take out the casket containing the necklace.

The need for secrecy no longer existed. Terrant and I clutched our revolvers, and Mohammed Khan's grip tightened on his sabre as the political agent said, with stern distinctness—

'Didst thou murder Gopal Singh as well as the Diwàn, Bhugwàn Dass?'

The lamp rested on the cabinet. The assassin, caught in the very consummation of his crime, had withdrawn the necklace, glittering and shimmering like a thing of life, from its receptacle, ere the words reached his ears. They must have pierced his brain like the report of a cannon, yet he calmly turned and faced us.

That last sight of him, alive, electrified me. Physically, as I have said, he was distinguished in form and feature; and the soul of the man, demoniac in its intellectual strength, utterly devoid of human sympathies, glared at us through his dark

eyes with all-absorbing hatred. Of fear or weakness there was not an atom in his composition.

An instant we stood spellbound. Then Terrant took a step forward.

'Where is Gopal Singh—thief?'

The epithet aroused Bhugwàn Dass from his trance of rage. He caught the lamp and dashed it at us. Terrant involuntarily ducked, and it fell in the outer vault, between me and Mohammed Khan. The oil leaped into lurid light, and three revolver shots rang out in quick succession. The agent staggered and fell, Bhugwàn Dass sprang through the doorway and fired at me, the bullet tearing the collar of my mess jacket.

Then the Sirdar got a lunge home. With a wild screech—in a superb effort to delay death for revenge — the stately Brahmin raised his right hand to level the revolver at Mohammed Khan, who, unable to withdraw his sword, gripped Bhugwàn's wrist, and the pair dropped together, extinguishing the flickering wick in their fall, whilst a loud report and a tongue of flame sped an aimless bullet to the roof.

I lit a match, to find Terrant struggling to his feet.

'I'm not badly hurt,' he explained. 'It's my collar-bone, I think.'

Mohammed Khan, too, arose.

'I had to kill him, sahib,' he said, 'else he would have slain the three of us. He had another revolver.'

By this time a crowd of startled natives was gathered in the adjoining rooms, so Terrant hastily asked me to station a strong guard over the vault whilst he summoned the state council. But first we searched for the fatal necklace. We found it under the corpse of Bhugwàn Dass.

With his death came enlightenment from other quarters. Some of his accomplices confessed, and implicated others to save their own skins. The discovery of the body of the unfortunate Gopal Singh in a large tank at the rear of the palace solved, in one sense, the mystery attending his disappearance. It was not until Terrant was sufficiently recovered to conduct the inquiry personally, that we wormed out the whole conspiracy.

Bhugwàn Dass, the prime mover, had

cleverly manipulated two strings. In the first place, after his agent in the telegraph office had warned him of the Maharàjah's death—the secret code having been purloined from Terrant's office—he secured the murder of the Diwàn, the rifling of the dead prince's coffin, and the theft of the agent's keys.

Secondly, he had set on foot the plot to secure the succession of Moti Bhai's son, with the resultant capture and strangulation of Gopal Singh. In each case his agents were themselves unaware of his personality, as he acted through two men only, and these were our informants. He believed that one conspiracy would supply false scent for the other, and that in the subsequent turmoil he would secure the coveted necklace, and strengthen his own commanding influence in the state.

One thing we never could discover, and that was the actual manner of Gopal Singh's death.

Six months later, soon after Sybil and I were married, the Government of India decided to educate Moti Bhai's son as the future occupant of the throne. To

Mohammed Khan's thinking, this outcome solved the only uncertain part of the story.

'Sahib,' he said to me whilst discussing the fact, 'a plot inside a zenana is often better laid than one outside. A man may see into another man's heart, but never into a woman's.'

Perhaps he was right. Anyhow, Moti Bhai is rapidly becoming famous as the Regent of Tolah, though Sybil says the Sirdar knows nothing about hearts.

CHAPTER X

HOW THE SIRDAR FOUGHT ALI BAGH, THE AFRIDI

HITHERTO I have not mentioned Miss Isobel Lee, the only daughter of our respected colonel. The day Mohammed Khan fought Ali Bagh, she was nineteen; and if she lives until she is ninety the lady herself will never forget the circumstances under which that particular birthday was celebrated.

The cause of all the trouble was big enough. Shah-in-Shah, boss-elephant of the Indus Transport Train, stood 11 ft. 4 in. without his stockings. In his hundred odd years of life Shah-in-Shah had learnt a thing or two. If his 10 lb. package of rice ran short by the weight of a coolie's dinner, if an extra case or two were slung on to his 2000 lb. load, if a predatory pony tested his allowance of hay and found it good, if the sappers were in a hurry when they erected a pontoon

bridge, our chief elephant went on strike with the determination of an amalgamated engineer. He would neither eat, work, nor march. He just waited for a court-martial to clear his character. After a few mahouts had been flogged, and the general had ordered the sappers to reconstruct a couple of bridges under a blazing sun, people dropped trying to fool Shah-in-Shah, and gave him his rights, both in weight and safe footing.

Sometimes he would strike in a different fashion, but with equal promptitude and magnificent effect. Here is a case in point.

One fine February morning, when the 2nd were stationed at a frontier post west of the Khaibar Pass, pretty Miss Isobel kissed her hand to her father as he sat writing in the verandah, and trotted off towards the encampment.

'Don't go outside the lines, Belle,' he shouted after her.

'All right. I'm only taking some biscuits to Hathi-Sahib'—the commissariat name for Shah-in-Shah.

The colonel smiled and sighed as he resumed work, for her mother had been

a noted horsewoman and devoted to animals. On her way she fell in with Spencer, the political officer for the district, and told him her errand.

'We travel together,' he cried. 'An Afridi deputation came in last night, and they are quartered in that locality.'

'Oh! I shall be delighted to see them; I want to write a story about the tribesmen.' The wildness of frontier life was fascinating to the recently emancipated schoolgirl.

'Tell the truth about them, Miss Lee,' he said, 'and your story will be a thrilling one. But please confine your studies to occasions like the present, when eight of them are surrounded by six hundred men of your father's regiment.'

They found the elephant and the Afridis together. Shah-in-Shah, tied by a small rope to a tent-peg—as one might moor an ironclad with a piece of whipcord—swung ponderously from side to side, contentedly thrusting wisps of dusty grass into his mouth. In front of him squatted the evil-looking Afridis, who had come to discuss tribal matters with the political officer.

The chief of the clan, Chumru by name

(the bones of another Chumru had long since whitened in a certain glade of the Kumaon Hills) was an old man. He was a frontier terror—murderer, thief, and rebel by turns — with spasmodic periods of quietude when supplies were short, or the tribal crops required harvesting. With him were his son, Ali—surnamed 'Bagh,' or 'the tiger'—a powerfully-built, forbiddingly-handsome man of thirty—bolder, more truculent, more ferocious than his father—and six elders of the tribe.

The elephant waved his ponderous trunk in pleasurable anticipation when Miss Lee sprang from her pony, drawing the reins through her left arm and laughingly showing him a crisp, sugary wafer. She gave him several toothsome morsels, and then teased him by pretending there were no more, until he found her hand behind her back, and finally stole the last remnant from the pocket of her riding-habit whilst she turned to look at the Afridis.

Meanwhile a heated argument was in progress between Spencer and the natives. Threats and specific charges on the one side were met by protestations, evasive denials, and absurd requests on the other.

At last the Englishman curtly closed the conversation, at the same time stepping forward to assist Miss Isobel to mount.

As she leaped lightly from his hand into the saddle, the vicious old chief, Chumru, thinking the girl was Spencer's daughter, and hoping to do her a serious injury without risk to himself, slipped to the pony's off hind-quarter, and gave it a sharp prod with a knife. The startled animal plunged wildly, knocking Spencer down, and bolted. But Isobel kept her seat and pulled him up within a quarter of a mile.

Two pairs of eyes had noted Chumru's action. Their owners were the elephant's mahout, squatted near his gigantic charge, and Shah-in-Shah himself.

Taking one huge stride forward and snapping his heel-rope without being aware of its existence, the elephant brought down his trunk on Chumru's skull with the force of a steam-hammer. Then he knelt on him and burst him.

Not all the water in the Indus would wash us clear of Chumru's death in the estimation of his tribe. The mahout's story was corroborated in every detail, down to the incised wound found on Isobel's usually

well-mannered Arab. But Ali Bagh and his followers withdrew with curses, carrying with them in a sack the remains of their dead chieftain. Shah-in-Shah was tried and acquitted, but he paid no heed to the court-martial. It did not concern shortage in rice or lightness in chupatties.

The dreaded trouble did not come. The tribe drew off into the fastnesses of the hills, and the incident was soon forgotten by all save Spencer, Mohammed Khan, and myself. We three knew the staying qualities of Afridi hate, and Sybil, at my request, urged the colonel to send his daughter to Simla. He yielded unwillingly—she had only joined him that cold weather—and he listened readily to her tearful pleading to be allowed to remain, at any rate until the end of March.

Thus a month passed. As the midday hours became hotter, parades and morning rides were earlier. Miss Lee never went far from the post, and she was always accompanied by one of the officers or a civilian on duty in the district. On the first Tuesday in March—I remember the day because I was busy with the forage accounts when the news came—she cantered

off with Monroe, the senior subaltern, for a spin along the Attock road. They had gone perhaps a mile and a half, and were trotting through a tope of trees by the side of a stream, when Monroe's horse was deliberately shot by a Pathan hiding behind a bush.

Monroe was thrown badly, but picked himself up in time to see Miss Lee fighting hard with her riding-whip against half a dozen mounted tribesmen—and it is seldom that these hill clans ride—who were tying her to the saddle.

Monroe's own horse was dying, so he ran on foot to the girl's assistance. Before he could reach the group they galloped off, taking Isobel with them. They halted to fasten their prisoner more securely, and again Monroe panted hard to overtake them, shouting to Miss Lee to make her horse rear.

She strove to obey him, but the effort cost her a cruel blow on each arm. In the next scurry they all disappeared, leaving Monroe, wild with anger and helplessness, standing in the road. He turned and ran to the camp. Within fifteen minutes from the time of the attack he was leading half

a squadron of troopers in hot pursuit, so, at the utmost, the fugitives had but four miles start.

I followed Monroe with another troop, and Sybil rode with me. Hours later we found the abandoned ponies of the Afridis, Isobel's with the others, grazing quietly on the brown grass tufts of a secluded valley. The affair had been planned by a master-hand, even down to the avoidance of injury to Monroe. The girl was clearly a hostage.

So sure were Spencer and I of this that we were not surprised when—after four days of maddening, because useless, search on our part—we received definite news by a messenger from Ali Bagh, who conveyed not only his chief's wishes, but a letter from Isobel to her father.

The girl's note served to rescue the colonel from insanity or death. She had passed through much hardship, and was now with the main body of the tribe in some remote part of the inner range of the Hindu Khush. Her captors did not treat her badly when she consented to go with them quietly. They even made rough attempts to procure her suitable food, and two women shared with her the hovel

where she slept. She begged her father not to be too greatly alarmed for her safety, as she was convinced, though she could not understand the tribal patois, that it was a question of terms to secure her release.

Isobel's surmise was correct. Ali Bagh calmly asked the political officer to grant safe conduct to himself and the six elders to arrange terms for the surrender of the miss-sahib, whom he had taken as a make-weight for his father's death.

The cool insolence of this head bandit annoyed Spencer so much that he blurted out—

'This fellow must be killed quickly. Otherwise he will set the frontier in a blaze.'

Colonel Lee misunderstood him.

'Save my daughter first,' he cried. 'We can deal with Ali Bagh subsequently.'

'I will try,' said the other gravely, 'but it will be a difficult matter. This scoundrel will ask impossible terms.'

'Anyhow, let us learn their extent. I will give him all I am worth in the world.'

'It is not a mere question of money, I fear; but we shall see.'

The requisite guarantees were written and

despatched. In due course, Ali Bagh and the elders were brought in by an outpost. They reached us during the afternoon of the seventh day after Miss Lee's capture. These representatives of a tribe of thieves and murderers well knew that they were safe in coming to the camp after the British had pledged their word to treat them as envoys. They did not betray the faintest trepidation, although the manner of their most recent outrage justified almost any trick we might have played on them.

In the case of any neighbouring chieftain, not excepting the great ruler at Kabul, they would have laughed at the idea of thus trusting themselves to hostile hands. To us they came secure in the consciousness that, whatever the result of their mission, they would be at liberty to depart when they chose. Such confidence was gratifying, if embarrassing; it threw a vivid light on the pretence that Chumru was killed purposely.

The colonel promised to control his temper at the conference, and found it less difficult to do so when Ali Bagh handed him another letter from Isobel. At my request Mohammed Khan was present. I noticed that

during the subsequent interview between the principals he held much *sotto voce* conversations with two of the tribesmen.

Ali Bagh's demands were preposterous. He asked a lakh of rupees as compensation for his father's death, and stipulated that he should be formally acknowledged as chief of the tribe, with restoration of territory up to the right bank of the Indus. He would have gone further, had not Spencer curtly interrupted him.

'This is the gabble of an infant, Ali Bagh. You come to treat for the miss-sahib's release. Restore her safely to the colonel-sahib, and I shall strive to forget your past misdeeds in the hope that you will be wiser in future.'

'You mistake me, Spencer-sahib. All that I have said, and more, must be done, else worse things may happen.'

'What? Dost dare to threaten us?'

'Call my words what you will, they are spoken.'

'Ali Bagh, listen to me. If any ill befalls the miss-sahib, the days of thy tribe and thyself are numbered. Government will hunt thee to the death. They will spare not, nor tire. Thou well knowest

our power, so provoke us not too much. Be reasonable, and prosper in peace within thy valleys rather than thus fly to ruin.'

But Ali Bagh was proud of his first exploit, and swollen with conceit.

'Upon you rests the stain of my father's blood,' he growled; 'and I will take even measure if you refuse my demands.'

Lee, of course, understood him, and became pallid with apprehension.

'For God's sake, Spencer,' he cried in English, 'do not exasperate him. Gain time. Offer to place his case before Government. I will find the money out of my own pocket and from my people—only rescue my child. She is still in good health, but suffering cruelly from suspense.'

Ali Bagh continued, with an air of quiet certainty that made my blood tingle—

'The miss-sahib's life pays forfeit for any ill you do my people, and it will take you long to find us.'

No wonder Spencer was exasperated. All the elements of a frontier war were in full brew; yet to accede to this well-known robber's terms would be disastrous when the news spread from the Khaibar to the

Bolan. Why, the tale would be told in every bazaar between the Indus and the Helmund—how Ali Bagh had despoiled the great and powerful Sirkar!

Spencer naturally looked at the political side of the question; Mohammed Khan, as you now know, generally prodded a question with his sabre when he sought to obtain a satisfactory settlement.

Walking straight up to Ali Bagh, he caught him by the chin-tuft of his black, curly beard, spat in his face, and said—

'Bazaar-born dog, wilt thou fight?'

The other winced at this frightful insult from one of his own race.

Never have I seen a swarthy skin turn so black with rage, nor a man's eyes flash with such menace. For an instant I thought those two would have torn each other with their naked hands, for we were all apparently unarmed; but the elders seized their leader, and we Englishmen held back the Sirdar.

The colonel, fearful for Isobel's safety, began to upbraid Mohammed Khan for this breach of good faith, but I managed to restrain him, guessing at some hidden development.

Spencer, too, admitted that, according to tribal customs, a personal quarrel to be determined by single combat took precedence of all prior arrangements. Ali Bagh was now bound to fight or be for ever disgraced. To be plucked by the beard and spat upon is far worse in the East than to be unwarrantably called a cardsharper in club-land.

It was soon decided that the two should meet at sunrise next day, in the presence of those only who witnessed the provocation. They should fight with swords, and carry no other weapons. Miss Lee's fate in nowise depended, to outward seeming, on the result of the combat. So far as she was concerned, the political officer promised to convey Ali Bagh's views to Government and to await the decision of the authorities before any other course was adopted.

When the opportunity arrived, I rated Mohammed Khan for his folly.

'Ali Bagh is half your age and strong as a tiger,' I said. 'You risk your life, and to what end? We want to save the miss-sahib, not to cut lumps off Ali Bagh.'

'Sahib,' he began with a smile, 'whilst

you talked to the chief I gossiped with the others.'

'I saw you at the time. But what of it?'

'The tribesmen are weary of war, sahib. They want peace. They are glad Chumru is dead, and will not be sorry if I send his son to join him in Jehannum to-morrow.'

'Ha! This news is important.'

'I will kill the outcast in the morning, sahib, and his companions will haste to bring back the miss-sahib, for they opposed the deed from the outset.'

'Then may Allah strengthen your arm, Mohammed Khan!'

I managed to evade Sybil's questions.

That night at mess the regimental surgeon told me that the rissaldar-major had astonished him an hour before dinner by asking for some substance that would make a man sleep soundly if placed in his food or drink, but which would be tasteless and harmless.

'And what did you give him?' I inquired.

'Oh, a stiff dose of morphine,' he answered.

Many times in my eventful life have I been under fire, many times crossed swords with the enemy, but never have I experienced so strongly that peculiar sensation of walking on air which comes to most men on the eve of combat, as when, in company with Spencer, I approached the rendezvous of the fight. The hot weather was not yet with us, and the early morning sun had scarce taken the chill from the atmosphere. I was certainly more unnerved than on other occasions fraught with physical peril to myself. The Sirdar was my only native friend. We had gone through much together, and I could ill bear the thought that he was incurring danger which I might not share. Notwithstanding his skill and courage, he had to face a younger, more active, and if all I heard were true, more expert swordsman than himself—an opponent of undoubted bravery, braced for the contest by every consideration that would avail a man in desperate strait.

Mohammed Khan's name and attributes were known to every tribesman on the hills. Should Ali Bagh overpower him,

there would be no limit to the Afridi's arrogance, yet the calm assurance he displayed in the acceptance of the challenge showed a quiet consciousness of victory that caused me keen anxiety. Spencer, too, was perturbed, for different reasons. If the Sirdar triumphed, all would be well. But, if he lost the day, an already difficult frontier situation would be magnified tenfold. Indeed, the Government of India might disapprove sternly of the whole proceeding. Could we senior officers have drawn back now, we would gladly have done so. But whilst we hesitated we walked, and at last we neared Mohammed Khan and the surgeon, who were first on the field.

'What manner of fighter is this Ali Bagh?' I inquired, after hearing that the rissaldar-major had slept well.

'He is the best sword-player in the hills, sahib. They say he can behead an ox with one blow from a heavy tulwar if the edge be true and keen.'

'Then you will strive to master him at the onset.'

'I shall kill him, sahib, whether it takes one stroke or a hundred.'

There was no nervousness about the Sirdar; I own that I felt emotional, and meant to ask him what his final wishes were should things go amiss. But, face to face with this old swashbuckler—lively as a schoolboy at the prospect of licking another youngster—I kept my thoughts to myself.

Ali Bagh and his followers were late. They came anon, and the chief proffered the explanation that the air of the plains made him drowsy, so that he slept too long. The phrase caught my ear, and I looked at Mohammed Khan. He was indenting his boot with the point of his sabre.

There was no nonsense between these two as to length or weight of swords or method of fighting. Mohammed Khan, of course, used the cavalry arm, whilst Ali Bagh, in a preliminary pass or two, made a five-pound tulwar, sharp as a razor, sing through the air with a sibilant note.

Once the signal to engage was given, each man was to do his best without let or hindrance. A single stipulation I insisted on absolutely. If either were

disarmed, the other must not strike, the defenceless one being considered beaten. The Sirdar, with some reluctance, promised to obey, and I told Ali Bagh that if he transgressed this rule I would have him shot at sight.

Then they faced each other. In an instant I saw why it was that Ali Bagh was confident. He was left-handed. All his life, whether in play or deadly earnest, he was accustomed to meeting right-handed opponents, and he well knew that in a sword combat it was many points in his favour to encounter those unused to so novel an attack.

He had not, however, heard that during forty odd years Mohammed Khan had trained himself to smite with either hand. Indeed, our excellent rissaldar-major had introduced the practice into the regimental training.

'In battle,' he would say to the recruits, 'the soldier who can use both hands with sword or lance is worth two men. If he be wounded on the right side, he can oppose the enemy with the left.'

As the thought flashed through my mind, I noted that our champion held his

sabre in the right, and I realised that Ali Bagh's imaginary advantage was dead against him, for a left-handed swordsman cannot hope to master an adversary of even ordinary skill, if the latter be acquainted with this method of assault.

My heart gave a great bound of delight at this unexpected piece of good luck. But there was no time for thought—it required all my capacity to see.

At a grunted word from one of the Afridis, the pair fell to. If you have never seen native swordsmen in India fencing with naked weapons for pure love of the game, you cannot comprehend how two men could belabour one another with cold steel as those two did without cutting each other into ribands. The bright blades whirled and swished like bands of light. They sparkled in the sunbeams with the exceeding speed and brilliance of tiny ripples, and every instant sparks flew as the heavy tulwar clashed against the more supple sabre. It seemed to me that Ali Bagh was wildly forcing the pace, whereas the other was coolly amusing himself in a clever defence, joined to an occasional

rapid blow when the Afridi would press too closely.

Yet even two such giants must breathe, and when the chief fell back, Mohammed Khan, nothing loth, dropped his sword, and the bout ceased for a little while.

Again the Afridi advanced, jealous lest the respite should be too favourable to his older antagonist; but he suddenly came to a dead stop. Mohammed Khan had changed his sabre to the left hand, for the straight hilt of our swords permitted this to be done.

If ever a man looked at death, Ali Bagh saw the grisly phantom at that moment. All the gain he hoped for from his peculiarity was gone, and in its stead he was now called upon to meet conditions which he felt must be fatal to himself. Astounded as he was to find the Sirdar so well able to withstand his onslaught, his surprise was as naught compared with the dread of this new discovery. It was *he* who had to encounter the unusual; *he* who must guard against a sinister foe. He blanched visibly, and the elders of his tribe uttered ejaculations which were far from reassuring.

The Sirdar smiled grimly.

'Thou art spent, Ali Bagh,' he murmured, with hearty relish of the situation. 'Yet it matters little, *sug*! A dead dog needs no breath.'

The taunt stung the other into madness. With a fierce yell he sprang forward, and heedless of consequence, struck a mighty blow at Mohammed Khan. The latter swayed slightly, diverted the murderous stroke down the forte of his blade over his right shoulder, and then smashed Ali Bagh's nose and teeth with the hilt of his sabre. The chief reeled backward, stumbled, and dropped his weapon just in time to save himself from being run through the heart.

At my warning shout the Sirdar stood fast, placing his foot on the fallen tulwar, when to my horror, Ali Bagh, who had sunk to his knees, pulled out a revolver and fired four times in rapid succession at my old comrade. At the distance it was impossible to miss him. We Englishmen rushed forward with howls of rage, but Mohammed Khan simply covered his face with his right arm, and did not move.

The frantic wretch who sought to murder him emptied the two remaining barrels before I could jam his head against a rock. I would have strangled him, had not the Sirdar himself, laughing and unhurt, restrained me.

'Let him live, sahib,' he cried; 'he is a jackal, not a tiger.'

The native onlookers were even more amazed than myself and my brother officers. Why was this man alive, nay, positively unhurt? Six bullets must have gone clean through his body. They gaped with superstitious awe. Their knees shook.

'He hath a *jadu*,' cried one.

'This is he whom lead and steel cannot hurt,' muttered another.

'I must say that this business licks me,' said the surgeon, and even the dazed scoundrel on the ground gazed affrightedly at his invulnerable opponent.

Mohammed Khan, vain old warrior that he was, glowed with the pleasure of all this mystification. Spencer alone took a phlegmatic view of the situation. Had a veritable spook intervened on behalf of the rissaldar-major, the political

officer would have kept his eye on the fact that Providence had extricated him, Spencer, from an exceedingly nasty situation.

'Go,' he said peremptorily to the tribesmen. 'Bring the miss-sahib with all speed. Fail not, or Allah will blight you as he has cast down Ali Bagh.'

They required little urging. Though fright palsied their limbs, they hastily made shift to obey him, only asking for horses that they might travel the faster.

We tied their erstwhile leader's hands behind his back, and marched him into camp to await his trial for many offences that could be proved against him. Sybil was first angry, then pleased, that I had not told her beforehand of the fight.

Next evening the regiment turned out to meet Miss Isobel and give her hearty greeting on her safe return from her wild adventures.

Now the surgeon and I had a theory. We sent for Mohammed Khan to elucidate it.

'To whom did you give that dose of morphine, Sirdar?' said the medico.

'I caused it to be mixed with the rice

eaten at night by Ali Bagh and the others, sahib.'

'Why?'

'I doubted Ali Bagh's honesty, sahib. So when he slept, I searched him and found the revolver hidden at his waist. I broke the bullet out of each cartridge and replaced the harmless blanks. When he fired, as I expected he would do, if cornered, I shielded my face to save it from the burning powder. I feared no other hurt.'

The tale travelled far, with many another of like character concerning the famous Sirdar Mohammed Khan.

But, lest I weary you, I cease.

L'ENVOI

One evening, not long ago, the Dalrymples asked Bingham and his wife, Sir William and Lady Terrant (the Secunderabagh affair gave Terrant the K. before the C.I.E.), Mr. Etherington, Sybil, and myself to dine at their house in Eaton Square.

The talk turned on the Sirdar.

'Do you remember, Wayne,' said Dalrymple, 'I mentioned his name to you before you went up country?'

'Yes, I remember it quite well.'

'And I introduced you to Ram Singh, the fakir,' laughed Sir William.

'May I remark,' cried Sybil, 'that I introduced myself!'

Bingham glanced at his wife.

'Edith and I will not forget in a hurry the night we met Mohammed Khan,' he said.

Mrs. Dalrymple pouted prettily.

'It is too bad,' she protested. 'During

our wanderings in India, poppa and I missed seeing the Sirdar. And we can't make a trip east for ever so long. Robert is going into Parliament, now that I have persuaded him to leave the service.'

'Nevertheless, Mrs. Dalrymple, I hope you will meet my old friend,' I said. 'Next year he retires on a pension, and he has promised Sybil and me to pass the summer at our place in Surrey. My father and he will find much in common. Meanwhile, I am preparing a present for him which will give him much joy.'

'What is it?' they all asked.

'An Urdu translation of a small book I am writing. It mainly concerns him, and the old dog is full of vanity.'

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